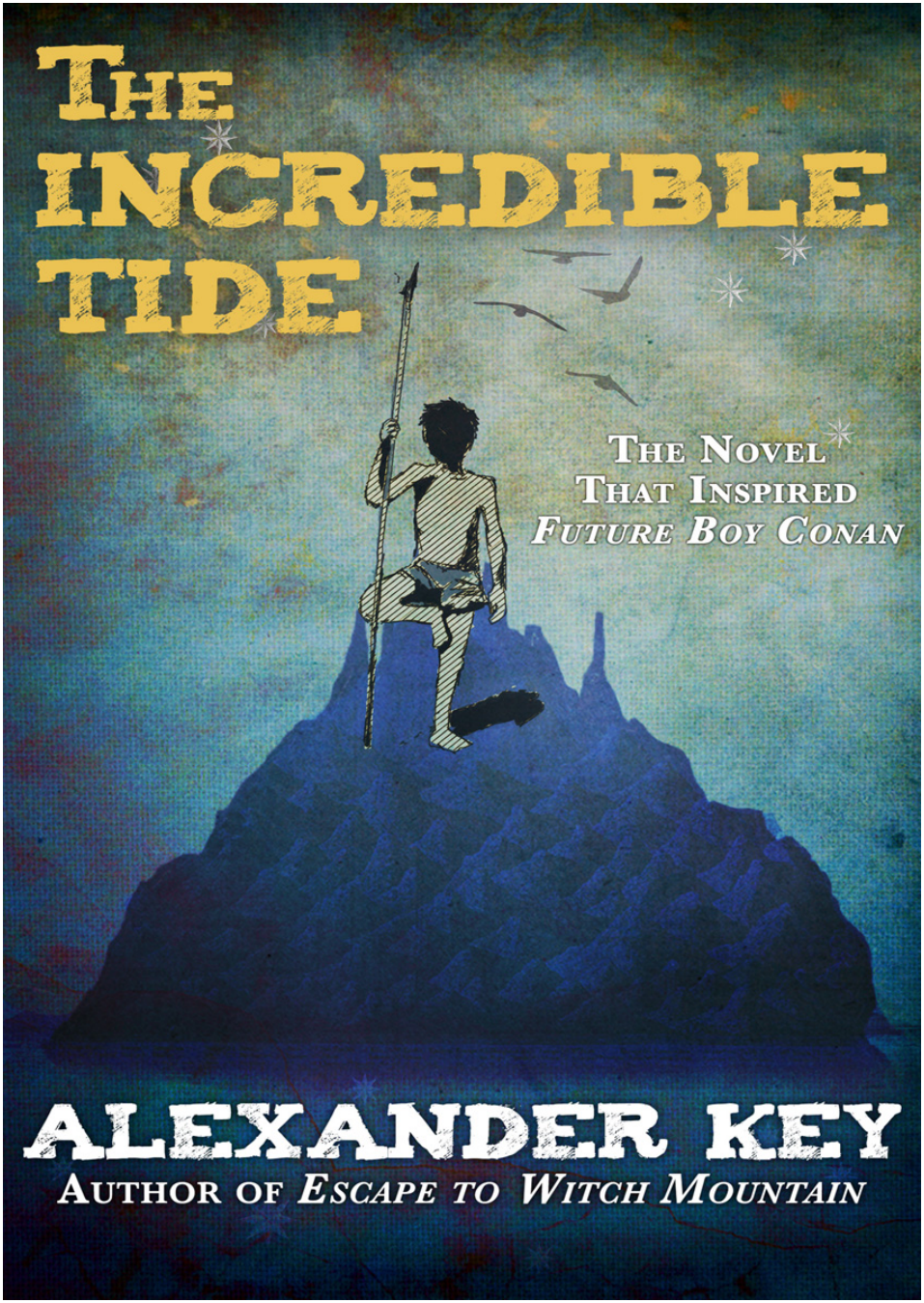
THE INCREDIBLE TIDE



THE NOVEL THAT INSPIRED *FUTURE BOY CONAN*

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The Incredible Tide

Alexander Key

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To a people unknown, of a land long lost—for surely what is written here has happened before. It depends upon us alone whether it is a reflection or a prophecy.

1
SURVIVOR

THE SEABIRDS, CONAN'S ONLY FRIENDS, AROUSED HIM at dawn by screaming and dropping pebbles on his hut. He crawled out eagerly and raced down to the narrow beach, sure that a school of fish had entered one of his tidal traps. The birds always called him like this when fish had been caught. But the traps, he soon found, were empty—and still the gulls and terns wheeled about him, making a great racket.

What were they trying to tell him?

He turned and ran up the steps to the highest point of his rocky islet, and climbed upon the stone platform he had built long ago. A quick look around showed only emptiness, save for the two smaller islets of the group, dim in the distance on either side. They bounded his world. Beyond them, and all around in the mist-haunted sea, nothing was visible, not even the horizon.

"What do you see, Tikki?" he asked, as a slender-winged tern circled close, giving quick little twitterings as if trying to speak. "Where is it? Show me!"

The tern brushed his lean cheek with its pinions, wheeled high, and shot away in the direction of the eastern islet. Several of the other birds followed. Conan watched until they were fading specks in the mist. Something was out there, surely, but it was far beyond the islet and invisible from here. A whale? No, a school of whales, most likely. Nothing else could cause such a stir among his friends. There wasn't anything else in existence that was big enough or unusual enough.

Or was there?

Conan gave a little shake of his tawny head and slumped down on the platform, hugging his knees in sudden misery. To judge from the evidence, there was very little left on the planet but water. As for people, if many remained after what had happened, most of them were probably castaways like himself. In the years since the last fleeing helicopter had crashed in that incredible tide, breaking apart and flinging him alone into the darkness, he hadn't seen or heard a craft of any kind, air or sea, nor had he even spotted so much as a vapor trail or a gleam of light. Was he the only person left? But of course he wasn't. He had proof that Lanna was safe.…

His mind leaped back to his twelfth birthday, a point in time he couldn't forget because that was the day he had crawled ashore here. Before that—but it was better not to think of before. He had been Conan of Orme—but Orme no longer existed, nor did any of the Western world. Time started when he was twelve, when, chilled and battered and hardly conscious, he managed to crawl from the sea. He was just Conan then. Conan, a lost and naked creature all alone.

He remembered how horribly cold he felt later, and how hungry, and how it got worse as he huddled against the rocks, wondering what to do. And there

wasn't anything he could do, because there was nothing here. Nothing. Not even a seabird.

How could you stay alive on a barren heap of rocks without food or water or clothes or fuel, or so much as a knife? You couldn't. To one who had lived always in the comfort of a world of electric buttons where machines did nearly everything, his predicament was utterly hopeless.

He knew he was going to die. And he would have, but for the voice that spoke to him.

"Conan," the voice said. "Are you blind?"

"No," he answered, before astonishment froze his tongue.

"Then get on your feet, Conan," the voice ordered, "and look around you. Use the intelligence you were given. You must grow and learn, for in time others will need your help."

He couldn't tell whether the voice came from somewhere near him, or was just in his mind. But it was a voice, startlingly real, and it suddenly made him think of Lanna's grandfather, who had surprised him once by saying that anyone who had the ears to listen could always hear the advice he needed.

He got unsteadily to his feet and peered about him.

The islet was new. It may have been the highest point of some rocky ridge, now drowned by the cataclysm that had changed the world. Or it may have been new land, upthrust. He couldn't tell. Nothing grew on it. Nothing. And the shallows around it were too new for shellfish or any sort of marine life. But when the tide went out he found long streamers of seaweed that must have been washed here from a great distance—and in a tidal pool he found a stranded fish.

Conan thought again of the wonderful flavor of that first raw fish. At the time he had no idea how easy it was to make cutting tools merely by smashing a rock, and he tore the fish apart with his teeth and his bare hands, relishing every bit of it. Even the juice was good—certainly it eased his thirst for a while. The seaweed was less satisfying, though he soon learned to like it, and later other and better kinds appeared and took root around the islet. Life here, he remembered, was suddenly a challenge. What had seemed utterly impossible was now possible—if he put all he had, all his wits and energies, into solving each of the problems facing him.

Conan glanced in the direction Tikki had flown, and decided that the whales—he was sure now that whales had been sighted—had gone away. Some of the birds were returning. He sighed and stood up, rubbing his calloused hands over his very lean and very hard body, and thought of what five years had done to himself and to the islet. Some of his earlier problems, like the cistern and the first small hut, had taken tremendous effort. Even so, those efforts seemed like nothing now. For as he grew—and he supposed he must have grown a lot—he'd been forced to even greater toil to rebuild the islet and save it from the battering sea.

Five years. And the voice, after speaking that once, had remained silent. There were moments when he almost doubted that he'd really heard it. Still, though the voice hadn't actually spoken again, a very curious thing had happened.…

It was several weeks after he had finished the first hut. Though he had learned to use a drill and make fire, he was tougher now and seldom needed it for warmth. Fire, with driftwood so scarce, was better saved for those blacker nights

that were so hard to face. For the one problem he couldn't solve was the awfulness of being alone. Entirely alone, and knowing there was no one left, anywhere, who cared about him. Not even Lanna, whom he missed the most.

It was worse that evening, he remembered. A rising wind drove him early into the hut, frightened by the knowledge that a storm was coming. As he struggled to get a fire going, Lanna and her birds were suddenly vivid in his mind. She was a quiet little birdlike person herself, with something about her no one else had—a sort of wisdom, maybe, or an understanding that went far beyond speech. Every wild creature knew it, birds especially. On the beach at home they always flocked to her whenever she called, and she'd taught some of them to do amazing things.

The storm that night was a horror. It brought back everything he wanted to forget, and it reminded him that he'd never see Lanna again. As he crouched by his fire, trembling and trying not to think, a terrible desolation swept over him. At that moment a monstrous sea battered the islet, and he couldn't help crying out in despair, calling on the voice to speak again and give him help.

The voice remained silent. But suddenly a gust of wind tore aside the curtain of kelp he'd woven for the doorway, and something small and white flew into the hut. It alighted near him by the fire.

It was a seabird—a tern.

He stared at it, incredulous. For an instant he almost believed that Lanna herself, in bird form, had flown here and found him. Then, as the tern moved closer and looked up at him, twittering plaintively as if it knew him, he suddenly caught it up in his hands and cried, "Tikki! It's you, Tikki! Lanna sent you!"

How he was able immediately to recognize Lanna's favorite bird, he didn't know. In the past he'd seldom been able to tell one tern from another. Yet, even before he found the silky band around one leg, made from a single pale hair from a familiar head, he was absolutely certain that the bird was Tikki, and that Lanna had sent it. For hadn't she always known how things were with him, and when he needed help?

He could almost hear her saying, "Go, Tikki, and find Conan. I know he's alive somewhere, and all alone. He needs you. Find him and stay with him."

After that night other birds, mainly gulls, began to arrive at the islet, and gradually he learned to call each of them by name and be counted as a friend. But Tikki's coming was the miracle that changed everything. Just knowing Lanna was alive somewhere, and thinking of him, would have been enough in itself. But it also meant that she must have reached the safe area that Teacher, her grandfather, had chosen long ago, and that others were there with her. As for himself—so he firmly believed at the time—he had only to stick it out here a few months, and a search craft was bound to come by and spot him.

A few months, Conan thought grimly. After nearly thirty months had gone by, with every day counted by a knot on a string he'd made, it began to dawn on him that people were having to start all over again, with practically nothing. Without power, most machines would be useless. And without materials and special tools, you couldn't build new ones. As for aircraft, how could you fly without fuel? Where would you find it? Still, with a person like Teacher to show you how …

But suppose Teacher hadn't survived? The old man never thought of himself.

Conan shook his tawny-yellow hair back from his forehead, sighed, and stood up. He cast a final glance at the eastern islet, saw nothing in the mist beyond it, then started slowly down the steps. His attention went to a precious pile of driftwood he had been saving. The pile, carefully weighted down with rocks to protect it from storms, now consisted of four planks of various sizes, several scrap pieces, a long, crooked log, an old surfboard made of plastic—the most exciting find of the lot—and six small poles.

The problem was to construct a boat from the materials at hand. Not just any kind of boat, but a very special one. It must be large enough and strong enough to carry him safely for several weeks, along with a supply of smoked fish, and water in a collection of bottles that had washed ashore. For if no one was going to rescue him, it was about time that he rescued himself.

The only trouble was, he didn't know a thing about building a wooden boat. Not a thing. During the long war years, when he'd lived on the coast with Lanna's people, he'd been around boats enough. But all of them were plastic. He'd never seen a boat made entirely of wood.

Yet putting a wooden one together couldn't be too difficult. If the primitives had done it, practically without tools, then surely he could do it too.

Usually, as his first task of the day, Conan would circle the islet to see what the tide had brought him. But now, suddenly absorbed in the problem of the boat, he even forgot breakfast as he crouched by a clean-swept area of sand and began drawing plans on it with a sharpened stick. He did not notice that Tikki had returned until he heard the tern's sharp call overhead.

He glanced up, frowning. "Hey, what's the matter with you now?"

Tikki swooped close, giving little cries of alarm. The gulls began circling again, screaming. Conan straightened, then went bounding up the steps to the platform.

The sky was lighter now, and streaks of red and gold were gleaming in the east beyond the islet. In this misty corner of the world it was a rare sight to see even a hint of a sunrise. Conan drank it in, enthralled, until he realized this was not what Tikki wanted to show him.

His eyes probed the grayness beyond the islet. Was something moving out there?

Something *was* moving. It looked like a large vessel, a patrol craft of some sort.

For a moment shock held him rigid. Suddenly he began to tremble, then all at once he was racing down to the narrow beach, shouting and crying and waving his arms wildly.

He need not have worried about being passed unnoticed. The vessel was moving slowly in his direction, no doubt attracted by the many retaining walls which gave the islet a fortlike appearance. When it was only a few hundred yards from the beach it dropped anchor and swung into the tide. Now he was able to see it clearly for the first time.

Abruptly the excitement in him died. With widening eyes he studied the squat, gray shape with the crimson pennant that hung limply at the masthead. He swallowed, and a coldness began to creep over him. His own people had never produced such a ship or flown such a flag. But the enemy had.

He was looking at a very old and battered patrol craft of what had once been known as the Peace Union.

With the realization of what could be in store for him, Conan stood clenching his hands in sudden desperation, trying to decide what to do. Had he even guessed in time what was approaching, he might have attempted the long and dangerous swim to the western islet, and hidden behind one of the numerous rocks in the surrounding shoals. But it was too late for that now.

Ugly memories awoke in him. His jaws knotted. The Peace Union! It had gobbled up half the planet when he was a kid, and it was threatening to gobble the other half when catastrophe struck. He had supposed that the incredible tide that had drowned a continent had swept the Peace Union out of existence. But obviously there were survivors. And at least one of their older patrol craft.

What was it doing here? Charting the remaining land areas? His hands shook as he watched gray-clad figures in belted tunics lower a boat and start toward him. Vividly for an instant he saw again the people who had once mattered so much to him—his parents and his small sister, his grandparents and Lanna's parents, and his best friends at school—all destroyed in a flash by the weapons of the Peace Union. His fists clenched. Abruptly he raised them and started to scream his hate.

But no sound passed his lips.

"Conan," spoke the voice he had not heard for so long.

He whirled and stared about incredulously, seeing nothing. "Wha—what is it?" he managed to say.

"Calm yourself, Conan," the voice ordered. "It is time to leave. You have a mission to accomplish."

When the ship's boat touched the beach in front of him, Conan was standing motionless with folded arms, outwardly calm. Only his narrowed gray eyes showed the storm within him.

Three men and a woman, all dressed alike in baggy trousers and shapeless tunics, stepped to the beach. The woman, gaunt, gray-haired, and hard-featured, was carrying what seemed to be a medical kit. She was talking even as she left the boat.

"Look at him!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe it! The picture of health. You there, how long have you been here? Or do you understand me?"

Conan realized she must be the ship's doctor, and that the bearded man beside her was probably one of the officers.

"I—I understand you," he replied haltingly. "Your language was taught to me in school. I've been here since—since the waters rose."

"Ah, a Westerner, eh? And you've been here since the Change? All alone?"

"Not alone. I have friends."

"Friends?" snapped the man beside her, whose beard was the heaviest of the three. "What friends? Where are they?"

"Overhead," Conan told him. "The birds."

Everyone stared at the flock of screaming seabirds wheeling angrily above them.

"Noisy pests!" muttered the woman. "What's got into them?"

"They don't like you. They know how I feel about you."

"Eh?" growled the man. "What d'you mean? Aren't you even thankful that you're being rescued?"

"Should I be?"

"This is no time to be stupidly insolent! Where is your gratitude? If you ever hope to become a citizen of the New Order—"

"The New Order?" Conan interrupted. "Is that another name for the Peace Union?"

"Certainly not! All the survivors of the Change are being reorganized under our banner. The world must be rebuilt. It will take every able-bodied person to do it."

The man with the heavy beard paused and glanced curiously about the islet. He scowled at Conan. "Now, I want the truth," he demanded. "You haven't lived here since the Change—not all alone. That's impossible."

"Why do you say it's impossible?"

"Because it *is* impossible," the woman retorted. "Why, this is nothing but a rock pile! You're entirely too healthy. Briac Roa himself—"

"Quiet, Citizen Doctor," the man ordered. "I want to question him."

"Yes, Citizen Captain. But something is obviously wrong here."

The captain nodded. "And I'll have the truth. This matter of Briac Roa—ah, you know Briac Roa, young man?"

"I—I know who he is." Conan faltered. "Of course. Everyone does. Why?"

He was astounded to find four pairs of eyes looking at him intently. The captain said, "There is a rumor that Briac Roa is alive. We have orders to find him."

"But—I don't understand. He's a Westerner. What—"

"It doesn't matter who or what he was. The New Order needs him. He's not at the refuge where his people went. So, if he's not in hiding, he's a castaway like yourself. He could be anywhere, even here."

"Then why don't you look for him?" Conan said coldly.

The captain was already pressing forward, eyes probing the tiers of walls, the cluster of huts behind their protective shield of stonework. The others spread out, searching. In a few minutes they were back where they had started, having twice covered every inch of the islet. All they had found of real interest to them were a few pieces of smoked fish from the storage hut. The captain and the doctor were devouring them eagerly.

"Ah, this is good!" murmured the doctor. "So good! The first I've tasted since—since—it was long before the Change."

"The sea is full of fish," Conan reminded her. "Doesn't the New Order allow you to have it?"

"We have it," growled the captain. "Plenty of fish! We dry it, and even make meal of it. By a fine new process—"

"But we don't smoke it," the doctor said a bit wistfully.

"Of course not! Smoking it would be a senseless waste of wood. The New Order doesn't waste valuable materials." He pulled a well-cleaned bit of backbone through his teeth, tossed it away, and licked his lips. Then he looked hard at Conan.

"You still persist in saying you've been here ever since the Change, and alone?"

"I told you I had my friends."

"Nonsense! You're hiding something. What is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The captain frowned and glanced at the woman. “What do you think, Citizen Doctor? You saw the wretches we found on the last trip. They had a big island—and they weren’t worth saving.”

“Did—didn’t you save them?” Conan asked.

“What for?” snapped the doctor. “They would have been a burden. The New Order couldn’t have used them. But you—” She paused, then said in a suddenly harsh voice, “We find it very strange that you managed to thrive where others would have died or gone mad. How did you do it?”

Conan shrugged. “I did have some help, of course. Maybe it was a guardian spirit. I never saw him, but I certainly heard his voice—”

“Oh, rot!” the woman interrupted impatiently. “Next you’ll be telling us there’s a God.” She frowned. “It could be your diet. What have you been eating besides fish? Birds?”

“Would you eat your friends?” Conan retorted.

The captain growled, “Take him aboard and do your questioning later. We’ve wasted enough time here.”

Conan started to back away, but the two younger men seized him. He shook them off angrily and sent them both sprawling with a display of strength he had not dreamed he possessed.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “But not until I’ve told my friends good-by.”

He turned and bounded up the steps to the platform. As the circling birds closed in about him, he raised his hands to them and spoke to each in a voice that was no longer steady. “I—I must leave,” he said. “Maybe, someday, I’ll see you all again. Tikki—”

Suddenly he snatched a curling yellow hair from his tangled mane, and swiftly wrapped and tied it about one of Tikki’s legs.

“Go!” he urged. “Go back to Lanna.”

When the bird finally understood, it rose, circled once, and began flying westward over the sea. Conan swallowed and watched it go, then went grimly down to face his captors.

2
SECRET

IN THE DIM KITCHEN OF HER GRANDFATHER'S COTTAGE at High Harbor, where so many young people had been flown before the Change, Lanna carefully sifted the meal she had ground and showed it to her aunt.

"This ought to be enough to feed everyone. Don't you think so?"

Mazal sniffed. "More than enough. If I had my way—"

"You'd probably poison the wretch," Lanna said, smiling in spite of how she felt.

"And would you blame me? Phah! That two-faced toad! And to think that we'll have to sit here at the table with him, knowing what we know, and swallow all his lies. Honestly, why Shann ever invited him to supper—"

"But he almost *had* to, Mazal. You know that."

"Oh, I suppose so. If we're forced to trade with the New Order, we have to pretend to be friendly with them. But it burns me up—the whole thing, I mean. If Shann only knew the truth—"

"But he doesn't. And we can't tell him."

"I don't know. I almost think we *should* tell him."

"But Teacher said not to."

"Yes, but that was before the trade ship came." Mazal frowned at the peas she had picked and almost angrily began shelling them. "To think that we have to *feed* that creature—What's his name?"

"Dyce. Commissioner Dyce. I know how you feel. He's so—so demanding. You'd think he *owns* us, the way he acts."

"And he will," Mazal snapped. "If these crazy young ones here let him. It frightens me. That's why Shann should know the truth. After all, Teacher put him in charge here. As the only doctor, he shouldn't have to be worried with it—he's run ragged taking care of everyone. If we could just think of someone else—"

"There isn't anyone else," Lanna said quietly.

"No, I suppose not. No one that's old enough and smart enough, that we could trust. It's an awful situation. I wish I knew what to do."

They looked at each other almost in despair, the very slender, pale girl with the startlingly dark eyes, and the gaunt young redheaded woman who was her aunt. After five years of hardship the difference in their ages had ceased to matter, and their regard for each other was more like that of sisters.

As she thought of Teacher, her grandfather, Lanna bit her lip and glanced out at the gray harbor, where the first trading vessel of the New Order had arrived only today. In its cargo, she knew, were many things the people here needed desperately, and other things they didn't need at all, but would probably get if they had their way.

“It will soon be time to go to the tower,” she said. “When you get in touch with Teacher, why don’t you ask his advice about telling Shann?”

“I—I hate to,” her aunt said unhappily. “He’s warned me several times not to tell him. I can see why. Shann’s so absentminded and honest, he could easily let something slip without realizing it.”

“Then we’d better keep it to ourselves.”

“Maybe so. Teacher’s where he is, and there’s nothing that can be done about it. We’ve got to keep on telling the story he told us to tell, and pray the truth never gets out. If it ever does …”

If it ever gets out, Lanna thought, High Harbor will go to pieces in a hurry. Then the New Order will take over, and we’ll all be slaves. Shann could never save us.

In the beginning, she remembered, life hadn’t really been too bad here. Hard, to be sure, but everyone expected it to be hard, and they’d all pitched in and sort of made a game of it. Shann and Mazal hadn’t been married long, and the young ones all looked up to them and thought Shann, their doctor, was great.

But five years had brought a terrible change. There’d been too few adults to look after things. And the hundreds and hundreds of children who had been brought here for safety were growing up wild. Most of them were now in their teens—and some of them were no better than savages.

She heard Mazal ask, “Is it time?” and glanced out at the early twilight and quickly estimated the hour. There were few clocks in High Harbor that were still in working order, but with practice she had learned to guess the time within minutes.

“No,” she said. “But I think you ought to go anyway and, well, sort of get composed.”

“But, honey, the supper—”

“Oh, fiddle, I’ll take care of it. The important thing is Teacher’s message. You’ve *got* to pick it up this time.”

“You’re right.” Frowning, Mazal tossed a cloak over her shoulders and went to the garden door. Then she turned. “Pray for me,” she said, then opened the door and slipped outside.

With her hands clasped tightly, Lanna watched from the window while Mazal hurried along the stone wall fronting the garden and entered the ancient tower at the far corner. She could not see the place where Mazal emerged after climbing the curving steps to the tower’s upper story, but she could visualize her aunt standing there under the thatched roof, eyes closed, facing seaward. And somewhere across those hundreds of unknown miles, Mazal’s father, Teacher, would be standing the same way, concentrating on sending his daughter a message.

Mazal wasn’t very good at it, and it was only by going through this same procedure every day, at the same place and hour, that she was able to pick up anything. Yesterday almost nothing had come through. Today—

Lanna closed her eyes and whispered, “Please, God, let her get Teacher’s message. Please.” A message just had to come this evening. With the trade ship here, it just *had* to.

As she went back to work, she suddenly began thinking of Conan again. Not that he was ever really out of her mind, but this was a nagging, worrisome

feeling that had been with her for several days. Something was wrong. Had it not been for all the work to be done, she would have gone to her room and tried—as she had tried a thousand times before—to send her thoughts out to Conan and get his reply. In time, she was certain, she would be successful. But that wasn't helping now.

With supper baking in the brick oven by the fireplace, she set the table and took fresh candles from the cupboard drawer. At that moment, glancing through the window to estimate the time, she saw two men coming up the rocky path from the harbor. They were Shann and Commissioner Dyce.

At the sight of the commissioner's blocky figure and his broad black beard that jerked back and forth with every movement of his chin, something froze in Lanna, and she thrust the candles back into the drawer. Candles were precious and hard to make. She would light them only for friends. If the commissioner couldn't manage his food by firelight, he didn't have to eat here.

Shann, trudging frail and worn beside him, his patched jacket hanging limply from his thin shoulders, seemed more than ever discouraged. All at once she realized what a terrible burden the poor doctor had been carrying, and how ill equipped he was to carry it. He's such a good person, she thought, but he wasn't cut out to be a pioneer. And that's what we are. And we're in such trouble.…

She thought the men were going to enter the cottage, but after coming through the main gate they swung around through the pines to Shann's little office, and she lost sight of them. Then she forgot them entirely until she went outside to get wood for the fire.

There wasn't any wood. Now she remembered that someone had taken the ax—of which there were only a few at High Harbor—and Shann hadn't been able to locate it before the trade ship came. Hurriedly she started for the pines, sure she could find enough twigs and fallen limbs to keep the fire going. But at the upper corner of the cottage she stopped abruptly. She could not see Shann and the commissioner, but she could hear their voices in close conversation. They were talking about Teacher.

She flattened against the rough stones of the cottage and held her breath. Commissioner Dyce was saying, a little angrily, it seemed, "But she *must* know where he is! If she's a communicator—"

"She isn't a regular communicator," Shann interrupted, his voice patient and tired. "She has no real ability. Her father was able to teach her just enough to keep in touch with him."

"Yes, I understand all that. But the thing is, she communicates. Anyone who does that cannot help learning the location of the other person. So I repeat, your wife *knows* where her father is."

There was a pause, and now Shann's voice was irritable. "Of course she knows! Haven't I told you? Her father's on an island somewhere—"

"An island! Always an island! Can you describe this island?"

"Do I have to?"

"I think it would be well if you did."

"Now you are threatening me," Shann said slowly. "I thought your purpose here was friendly. A trade mission. That's what the survey boat promised when it came earlier this year. You people have things we need badly—and we have things you need just as much. So we made an agreement. But instead of being

friendly, you've become threatening."

"Oh, come now," the commissioner rumbled in his deep voice. "If I wanted to threaten you, I could. We are armed—and you have no defenses here."

"Our numbers are defense enough. And many of the young people are armed —"

"With bows!" the commissioner said scornfully. "But I would rather be friendly as long as possible. The world must be rebuilt, and all men must work together to do it."

"Under whose direction? Yours?"

"Naturally. We're far, far in advance of you. We've salvaged a fleet of ships already—and you've salvaged none. We have a complete factory-city in working order, and thousands of citizens busy in production. Can you say the same? And what are you producing here? Anything but discontent? Why, you've hardly started cutting the timber we ordered months ago."

The commissioner paused. Lanna, who had been listening incredulously, thought: Oh, don't believe all he tells you, Shann! He's full of lies. He's just trying to bully you.

Shann said quietly, "I wouldn't think of doubting you, Commissioner—and you shouldn't underestimate us. As for the timber, I warned the captain of your survey ship that we couldn't do much cutting till you brought us tools. I hope they are power tools."

"Power tools!" the deep voice exclaimed. "Certainly not! You've neither fuel nor electricity here. The only power tool you could use would have to be a solar machine—and there's only one man living who knows the trick of making them."

"Really? Teacher is the only one?"

"Of course! I thought everyone knew that. What a terrible thing it would be if this 'Teacher,' as you call him here, could not be found. Why, it might take the world a thousand years to regain his knowledge!"

"I imagine so," Shann admitted.

"So, my good Doctor, you owe it to yourself, and to every survivor of the Change, to help us locate him."

There was a tired sigh. Then Shann said slowly, "Look, I've told you all I know. Teacher was one of the last to try to fly here, but he started too late. The big machine with him was lost, and we don't know what happened to it. His little machine was smashed down near one of the new islands. All we've been able to learn is that it's a large, hilly island, and there are two other survivors with him. As for the boat they are trying to build—"

"Yes, what about this boat?"

"We understand it's nearly done. They'd probably be here now if they could have found materials sooner. It may take your survey ship a year to search out all the islands. If you're so anxious for Teacher's help, why not just wait for him? With any luck, he should be here before the fogs set in."

The commissioner grunted. "You don't know navigation, Doctor."

"What's the difficulty?"

"Difficulty! Oh, my mother, those are *new* seas out yonder, Doctor. There are no charts for them—and no proper aircraft left that can be used to explore them from above. Just finding you was a miracle. There are shoals and reefs we're just learning about. North isn't where it used to be—and there's an area out there

where a compass simply won't work. Anyone caught there when the fogs come might never find his way home. There are strange currents that could sweep a vessel halfway around the world. Suppose you ran aground, or used up your fuel? Where could you get help today?"

There was a silence, then the commissioner went on. "Those fogs are due in two months. We're taking no chances with them. We're getting out of here well ahead. If you haven't got us loaded in time, the loss is yours. As for your father-in-law, he's got to be found. And soon. So you'd better do as I tell you.…"

The rest of the words were lost in the sudden chattering of a squirrel in the branches overhead. It was followed by the equally happy cries of seabirds cruising above the cottage. Lanna retreated hastily. Her friends had discovered her.

At the kitchen door she paused as wings began beating close about her. "Go way, you silly things," she whispered fondly. "Can't you see I've nothing to feed you yet?"

A tern fluttered down and settled wearily on her hand. At the sight of it she gasped. Instantly everything else was forgotten.

"Tikki!" she said breathlessly, trembling. "I can't believe it—you've come back! But—but what's happened? Why are you here?" Then, seeing the tawny band on one leg, she gasped again. "Conan sent you!"

She held the bird to her cheek as she tried to think. Her dark eyes grew wide with fear and uncertainty. Why had Conan sent Tikki home? He wasn't hurt or ill—she was sure of that. Could it be he was leaving his island? But why—?

All at once, in a rush of understanding, she realized there was only one reason Conan would send Tikki to her. It was to let her know that he had been found—and was now a captive.

She whirled and raced along the garden wall to the tower. Teacher must be told of this immediately.

3
BRAND

SOON AFTER HE WAS BROUGHT ABOARD THE SURVEY vessel, Conan's tangled mass of hair was clipped short, and he was given clothes to cover his nakedness. They were old and patched, and made of a shoddy synthetic material that felt unpleasant against his skin, but at least they seemed to be clean. Again the doctor questioned him, and became furious when he gave her the same answers he had given before.

"Voices!" she cried in disgust. "Of all the rot! When we reach port, you'd better watch your tongue with the work commissioner. Try telling *him* it was voices that kept you so healthy, and you'll be disqualified."

"Disqualified for what?"

"For living, you fool! The New Order can't take chances with crackbrains. They might wreck valuable equipment. Besides," she added in a lower voice, "I'd hate to see such a fine young body thrown away. Such beautiful muscles! In all my life I've never seen their equal." She felt his arms. "Like steel! The New Order needs your strength."

He thanked her for her warning, then asked, "Where are we going?"

"Home for more fuel. Then out again to chart all the new lands we can before the fogs come."

"But—where is home?"

"Industria, of course."

"Is that a—a city?"

"It's the city of the New Order," she informed him proudly. "Soon it will be the capital of the world. We'll be there in a few days. Three, four maybe. These are strange waters; we must proceed very carefully."

He saw the haze of Industria, and smelled it, long before the plodding vessel crept close enough for him to make it out. Something about its sprawling ugliness was vaguely familiar. With mounting distaste he stared at the acres of tangled pipes and tanks, the oily smoke curling from some of the stacks, and the vast clutter of plastic buildings, all rising starkly between the sea and the bleak hills. Finally, as the vessel eased in behind the protection of a makeshift breakwater, he remembered a picture he had seen years ago.

"Why," he said to the doctor, who was waiting impatiently to go ashore, "isn't this one of those chemical cities the Peace Union was planning to build? You know, where everything was supposed to be made of plastics or synthetics, even the food—"

"This is the *model* city," she interrupted curtly. "The only one finished before the Change. And don't call the food synthetic. It is the best food ever made, and the most scientific. You've been eating it ever since you were rescued."

"I wasn't rescued," he retorted. "I was captured. And I'd hate to feed your food to a dog."

She whirled on him angrily. "There is no finer food on earth, and you'd better learn to like it! And, so help me, you'd better watch your tongue when you go ashore, or you'll wish we'd never found you."

Almost before the lines were made fast she jerked her chin at him, swung her long, bony frame over the rail, and leaped to the dock. As he caught up with her, she said, "I'm turning you over to the work commissioner. He'll assign you to a job. You'll fare much better if you show a little gratitude for the opportunity you're being given."

"What opportunity?"

"To become a citizen of the New Order, of course! You'll begin as an apprentice citizen, and the rest is up to you. Nothing is free in this world. It must be worked for."

He forced back his sudden anger and strode glumly beside her. They crossed a square littered with what seemed to be plastic building supplies, and turned toward a long, grimy structure pierced with rows of small windows. The red pennant of the New Order flew defiantly over the entrance.

Just before they reached the place, a sudden down-draft from one of the smokestacks bathed them with acrid fumes. The doctor paused, threw back her gaunt gray head, and breathed deeply. "Ah, that is a good smell!" she cried. "The best smell in the world!"

Conan choked and managed to stutter, "W-what's so good about it?"

"Because it is the smell of life, and progress," she reminded him sharply. "It has kept us alive ever since the Change. Someday it will help us rule the earth."

She led him into a long, bare hall and through a door on the left. They entered a bleak outer office where several men were in close consultation over a wall map. Beyond them in an adjoining room he glimpsed a huge, red-bearded figure hunched over a desk that seemed much too small for him.

Conan was wondering why every man he'd seen was bearded, when Red Beard glanced up, raised bushy eyebrows, and suddenly roared, "Citizen Doctor Manski! I thought it was about time you were back. Come in and tell me what you found."

"We didn't find much, Citizen Commissioner," the doctor replied as she entered. "Very little, I'm afraid, that you'd care to hear about. I'm sorry—"

"Stop being sorry," he ordered, "and give me the facts. What *did* you find?"

"Twenty-seven new islands, all practically worthless. The captain will bring you a full report when he comes."

"No survivors?"

"Just one. He's young, but he should make a good worker."

"No sign of that fellow we want?"

"Not a trace! I'm beginning to think that bunch at High Harbor are keeping something from us."

"Well, Dyce is there now. He should be able to pry the truth out of them. In the meantime, keep searching. Try Area Three this time."

"But that's where the compass always goes bad," she reminded him.

"I'll speak to the captain about it. You should be able to check it before the fogs come. If there's land there, Briac Roa *could* be on it." The commissioner

paused and scowled at Conan, waiting in the doorway. Abruptly he exclaimed, “Don’t tell me that’s the survivor you brought back!”

“It is. And I certify him as physically perfect, strong, and intelligent. But he’s rebellious—he doesn’t appreciate his opportunity.”

“Ha! A little work will take care of that. But he’s amazing! Such health! Come here, young fellow,” the commissioner ordered, “and let’s have a look at you!”

Inwardly raging, Conan entered and submitted to the big man’s questions. They were the same ones he had been asked before, but they were sharper, and his bullying questioner was far more demanding. Conan’s rage mounted. Only the memory of the voice he had heard enabled him to hold his temper in check.

But suddenly he burst forth, “Why are you treating me this way? I’m willing to work for my keep, but is there any reason you can’t—”

“Shut up!” the commissioner ordered. “You’re a Westerner. You’ll have to prove yourself before we can accept you as a citizen.”

“But I don’t want to be a citizen! All I want is to go to High Harbor. The next time one of your boats—”

Dr. Manski snapped, “Don’t be ridiculous! Soon everyone at High Harbor will be glad to have citizenship. If you’ll take my advice—”

“I said, shut up!” the commissioner ordered again. Then he roared, “Citizen Repko!”

A large, pale-eyed, loose-jointed man, heavy-featured and almost beardless, appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Citizen Commissioner?”

“Take this young fool,” growled the commissioner, “see that he’s marked and listed, then send him back for assignment.”

Conan was thrust into the other room and made to stand at attention while Citizen Repko, with obvious enjoyment, used a stylus and a paperlike piece of plastic to record his name, date of rescue, and other pertinent information. Finally Citizen Repko took what appeared to be a thick metal tube from his desk, and ordered him to stand against the wall.

“What’s that?” Conan asked suspiciously. “What are you going to do?”

“Shut up and hold still!” he was told.

He saw that the other men in the room were watching expectantly while one end of the tube was placed against his forehead. There was a click as a spring was drawn back, then a sudden snap that made him gasp as hundreds of stinging needlepoints were driven into his skin.

He jerked angrily away. “What—what have you done to me?” he demanded.

“Look in the mirror,” said the wielder of the tube, smirking. “See how pretty we’ve made you!”

Conan whirled and stared into a cracked glass hanging near the door. On the forehead of the incredulous face staring back at him was a large scarlet cross. An indelible cross, for now he remembered that this was how the old Peace Union used to mark its prisoners—with a tattooing machine that drove the color into the skin.

He touched the blazing mark with trembling fingers and turned slowly, outraged. Even then he might have held his mounting fury in check. But the sudden raucous laughter of the four men watching him was too much.

All at once a cry of pure hate tore from his throat. Before anyone realized what he was doing, he had snatched the tube from the grinning Repko and thrust it

against the man's forehead. It was done so quickly and with such force that Repko was slammed backward and pinned in a corner. In his rage Conan did not even think of setting the tube's mechanism, but it hardly mattered. The dye-colored needles were already protruding. The sting of them brought a howl, and Citizen Repko fell writhing to the floor.

Conan turned at the sound of angry voices. Two men seized his arms, and a third tried to jerk the tube from his grasp. He jammed it into the fellow's forehead, then spun about, using the tube as a club. It broke finally, for it seemed to be made of some light cast metal. But by this time there was no one left who felt like tackling him, not even the red-bearded commissioner who stood gaping in his office door.

With a last surge of temper Conan pounded the end of the tube upon the floor until it was beyond repair, then flung it in Red Beard's face.

He made no resistance when men poured in from the hall and seized him.

Six quiet, graying men marched him outside and across the square. With hardly a word they shoved him along the untidy waterfront to a half-submerged area, and over to a concrete cubicle built into a wall. The place looked as if it might once have been a sentry box. He was thrust inside—thrust almost gently, it seemed—and the small plastic door was closed and locked.

Through the narrow slits in the walls he peered curiously out at the men, wondering what they were. Surely not regular guards. They had spoken but little while he was with them, but as the group turned to go back he heard one of them say in a low tone, "Did you see what he did to Repko?"

There were soft chuckles, and another said, "Haggel got it too. Most of the dye was gone, though it came out a very fine shade of pink."

Conan heard a quickly suppressed guffaw. Then: "Old Patch has been begging for a stronger helper. If Patch gets him, it will be punishment enough. I wouldn't wish anyone …"

The men moved beyond range of his hearing. He eyed them thoughtfully until they were out of sight. Finally, scowling and muttering to himself—a habit he had formed on the islet when trying to solve some problem on which his very life often depended—he began pacing in a circle in his tiny prison. Occasionally he halted and glanced out through one of the slits to study his surroundings. He missed very little, and already he had gathered a surprising amount of information since coming ashore. He was trying to arrange his observations into a clearer picture when he heard the quick scrape of plastic boots on the cracked paving outside.

His visitor was Dr. Manski. The black eyes in her gaunt, hard face were glittering with cold wrath.

"You fool!" she bit out harshly. "You utter, complete fool! Whatever possessed you to act the way you did?"

In spite of his uncertain predicament, a strange calm had come over him. "How would you have acted," he replied, "if you had been in my place?"

"Why—why, I'd have used my head!" she snapped. "Don't you realize you've practically signed your death warrant? You can't attack citizens of the New Order and destroy valuable property without being punished. You'll probably be disqualified."

Conan shrugged and wished she would go away.

"Did you hear what I said?" she thrust at him. "*Disqualified*!" He shrugged again.

"Doesn't the thought of dying frighten you?"

"No."

"Don't talk such nonsense! Of *course* it frightens you."

"No," he said slowly. "I haven't been afraid of anything since—"

"Well? Since what?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand. You see, I—I was sent here for a purpose."

She stared at him. "*Who* sent you? For *what* purpose?"

"I don't know yet. And I've already tried to explain it to you—"

She snorted derisively. "Rot! And don't hand me any more of that stupid 'God' stuff, or I'll not waste my time ashore trying to help you. I must leave in the morning."

"Why should you help me? What for?"

"Because the New Order needs you!" she flung at him angrily. "It needs your youth and your strength—but it's going to take all I can do to get the commissioner to overlook what you've done. You've hurt two of the men badly, and you've completely ruined the only marker we have. You'll have to practically get down on your knees and beg the commissioner's pardon. Even then—"

"I'll beg nobody's pardon!" he flared. "He'd better beg mine! What right has any of you to brand me like this? Are we at war? No! Am I a criminal? No! Was I brought here of my own free will to work? No! I despise the whole bunch of you. You're worse than the Peace Union. You—"

"Shut up and listen to me—"

"You'll hear me out!" he cried. "All this talk of rebuilding the world—who are you trying to fool? The survivors you've captured and branded? What a lie! You people caused the Change in the first place—don't tell me you didn't, because you did!—and now all you want is to run what's left of the world. If you had any decency—"

"Oh, stop talking like an idiot! Don't you realize it took *both* sides to do the damage?"

"I don't believe it!"

"But it did! Now someone has to put the pieces back together."

"Only it has to be done *your* way—and with branded prisoners! You'd even take over High Harbor if you could, and rob everybody of his rights! Why, you're the dirtiest bunch that ever—"

"Shut up!" she ordered icily. "*No* one has any rights, not even I. Only the *state* has rights—the New Order. It's only the *state* that—"

"State, my eye! Of all the stupid ideas!"

"You're the stupid one! Stupid and ignorant. Of course we'll take over High Harbor—and soon! We'll be doing them a favor. They're entirely incapable of looking after themselves. If you could only see—"

"I can see how warped and twisted you are! And greedy!" He was shaking with fury by now, and hating her as much as he'd ever hated anyone. "Go away!" he shouted. "Leave me alone!"

She glared back at him a moment, her black eyes narrowing, her thin mouth

hardening dangerously. Abruptly she turned on her heel and began striding away.

A dozen yards from his prison she hesitated, then stopped. Slowly she turned and strode back.

"You're so young," she told him tersely. "Hardly more than a child. And so very foolish. But you will be judged as an adult, because you are so tall and strong. We need your strength, and that alone may save you."

He opened his mouth to speak, then wisely closed it as it dawned upon him that she really was trying to help him.

"I've only a few minutes," she said. "When I leave, I may never see you again. You may be disqualified, and driven into the sands."

"The—sands?"

"The desert," she snapped. "It's out back—hundreds of miles of it. We seldom bother to kill unless a disqualified person tries to return. Then he is shot."

She paused a moment, and hurried on. "Now listen to me carefully. I am going to talk to the commissioner, and to others if I can. If you are brought in for questioning, do as I have told you. Don't act like a fool again. And remember—if you're allowed to live, it is worth working for citizenship. This is a better place than you think."

Through the slit in the wall he raised questioning eyes to her. She said harshly, "If you can prove yourself as a citizen, you will discover how good it is. We all work together for the state, so there is no crime here. And, naturally, there are no police. But there is punishment—as you will find out. People like you must be taught that the New Order *always* comes first."

Suddenly she gave an angry shake of her head, turned to leave, then said over her shoulder, "I don't know why I even bother with you. You Westerners killed my son, so I have every reason to hate you."

With that she marched grimly away.

Long after Dr. Manski was out of sight, Conan stood peering from his prison at the empty waterfront, thinking of what she had told him and of all he had seen and heard. No police here? Then Industria must be the sort of place where everyone watched everyone else. You'd be afraid to trust your own brother. And who ran things? The commissioners? Then who were the middle-aged men who'd marched him out here and locked him up? They'd jumped when the work commissioner yelled for help—but they'd been secretly pleased over what had happened. They couldn't possibly be regular guards. They looked more like—well, doctors or professional men.

Then he realized that was what they had to be. Chemists, science workers, technicians of all kinds. Of course! They must have been here from the beginning, for it took people like that to keep a chemical city operating.

Only, nothing seemed to be operating very fast here.

The only signs of activity were far down the curving waterfront where he could just make out the stern of the patrol craft that had brought him from the islet. Occasionally figures appeared on the flimsy dock beside it, carrying boxes which they heaved aboard. His view in the other direction was cut short by the protruding wall of the building against which his tiny prison had been built.

Suddenly, as he looked again at the submerged area near him, he realized that

an important part of the city must have been drowned by the Change. And wouldn't a lot of important brains have been drowned at the same time?

Some instinct told him that Industria wasn't all that Dr. Manski liked to pretend it was.

He could hear sounds of work going on all around him—but something was missing. What was it? Then he remembered that every large factory area he'd ever been in had a kind of overall sound, a very soft purr or hum. It went with big machines and power. Industria didn't have it. Could it be running on emergency units?

Conan scowled at the drowned section. If the city was running properly, automatically making what people needed, then life should be really easy here. But obviously life wasn't easy.

Why? The answer was right in front of him. The whole drowned section contained the wreckage of solar equipment, barely awash in the tide. The heart of Industria was dead. And dead with it, without a doubt, were the select few who might have known the secret of building a new heart.

No wonder they wanted to find Briac Roa!

He was wondering if it could be noon when a gong sounded in the building on his left. Men and women, dressed alike in the same cheap tunics, poured from a nearby entrance. Evidently they had heard about him already, for they all glanced at him curiously before turning and hurrying down the waterfront.

The last two workers swung in the opposite direction. As they passed, only a few feet away, they peered at him furtively, and he was startled to see that each had been branded on the forehead with a scarlet cross like his own.

"Hey!" he called. "Just a moment, please—"

They looked away without replying, and hastened out of sight around the projecting wall.

In quick anger Conan bruised his fist on the concrete enclosing him. Then he sighed and shook his head. He'd already guessed how it was here. Everybody afraid of everybody else—especially the branded ones, and the ordinary workers. If anyone so much as spoke to him, it would probably be reported.

The lunch period was soon over and he watched the workers return. The thought of their synthetic food kept his appetite at bay, but his thirst was growing, and he wished someone would bring him a drink of water.

By midafternoon it dawned on him that the work commissioner might keep him here for days until he was nearly dead of thirst. Fury boiled in him again, and without thinking what he was doing, he kicked viciously at the plastic door.

A long crack appeared near one of the hinges.

His eyes widened at the sight of it. Then he braced himself and started to kick again, harder.

Abruptly he froze. Someone was coming.

From around the corner of the projecting wall appeared a long cart with four rattling plastic wheels. It was being pushed by a very lean old man with a white beard and a wild mass of thick white hair. He was an irascible-looking fellow, made almost piratical by the black patch that covered one eye. On his forehead was a scarlet cross.

As he shuffled past, scowling fiercely and muttering, Conan was astonished to see the good eye swivel quickly in his direction, then close in a wink.

Man and cart vanished down the waterfront. Minutes later they reappeared, and now the cart was loaded with several sheets of heavy plastic. As they came again by the prison, the cart tilted suddenly on the broken paving, and the plastic sheets fell off.

"Blow it an' blast it!" the old pirate sputtered sulphurously. He began reloading the plastic, all the while muttering a stream of imprecations. In the middle of it, almost as if catching his breath, he whispered swiftly, "They call me Patch.… Take it easy, son.… See you tonight.…"

A final whisper, sandwiched between mutterings, reached Conan's ears as the cart began clattering away.

"Lanna has Tikki again."

Shock held Conan rigid. Then he told himself he couldn't have heard right. It was impossible. How could that incredible old rascal be the man he had to be in order to have uttered those last few words?

But he was. Only Teacher himself could have learned about Tikki. Teacher was here, a prisoner of the New Order—but he had so changed his appearance and manner that there was no possibility of his ever being recognized by those who sought him.

4
ORLO

LANNA FILLED THE TEAPOT, LET IT STEEP A FEW MOments, and brought it over to the table where Shann was huddled in heated conversation with Commissioner Dyce. She made the tea only because she knew Shann needed it, and not from any feeling of hospitality. The commissioner had been after Shann for days, threatening and bullying, first about one matter and then about another. This afternoon the argument was over the abandoned aircraft.

"We must have them," the commissioner was saying. "I absolutely insist upon it."

"No," Shann told him wearily.

"Don't tell me no," the other rumbled, his black beard wagging angrily. "You have no use for them whatever! Why, you can't even repair them, and even if they could be flown, where would you find fuel—"

"No," Shann repeated. "The aircraft were not in the agreement we made with your survey people. Furthermore—"

"Forget the agreement! *I* am the one in charge of trade." The commissioner pounded the table with a heavy fist, making the dishes rattle.

"Commissioner," Lanna interrupted, "if you care to drink our tea, you'll have to stop hitting the table so I can pour it."

"Eh? Tea?" The black beard jerked in her direction, and the small eyes under the heavy, scowling brows seemed to become aware of her for the first time. "Oh, very well. Pour it, girl. Pour it."

Lanna suppressed an impish temptation to dump the contents of the teapot down the man's neck, and very carefully filled both cups. She heard Shann murmur, "Where's Mazal?" and answered quietly, "Gone fishing."

Earlier Mazal had said, "If I have to listen to that toad again, I'll lose my temper and make it worse for all of us. Anyhow, we need something for supper. Maybe I can catch a flounder."

Just before leaving, Mazal had said, "Don't you want to try it—just once?" But she'd shaken her head quickly, frightened at the very thought of being so close to the strange sea she so feared and hated. Once she'd loved the water and the beaches, but now she could not force herself to go nearer than the harbor. It was protected, and the jutting headland blocked all view of the dreadful expanse that stretched beyond it to the horizon. But Mazal did her fishing along the open bay, which was just across the headland. Lanna couldn't go there.

As long as she lived, she knew she could never overcome her horror at that rising, roaring tide that swept the land the evening Mazal flew her up here. Their little craft, twin of the one Teacher used, had been dangerously overloaded with Shann's medical equipment, and they hadn't been able to keep up with the big craft ahead. They kept sinking, lower and lower …

Suddenly Lanna found herself wondering again about a detail she had nearly forgotten.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the commissioner. He slurped noisily from his cup, then demanded, “What kind of tea is this, girl?”

“Sassafras.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“A tree that grows up here. We use the roots.”

He took another long slurp. “Not bad. Not bad at all. I’d better have a few bales of those roots along with the other things.”

Shann shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Eh?” The commissioner set his cup down slowly. “You say no to this. You say no to that. You are exhausting my patience, Doctor. I think you owe me an explanation.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Shann retorted, with a sharpness that surprised Lanna. He took off his glasses, rubbed his tired eyes, and said slowly, “We have just a few of those trees, and they give us our only beverage. Teacher had them planted before the Change, along with other things that don’t normally grow here. They spread rapidly, and in a few years we’ll have some to spare. But not now. They are among the items barred from trade.”

“So? And who barred them?”

“Teacher.”

“And did Teacher bar the aircraft also?”

“Certainly. And I wouldn’t think of going against his orders.”

A dangerous redness was darkening the commissioner’s face. “Are you trying to tell me that this invisible Teacher of yours runs High Harbor and tells all of you what to do?”

“Of course,” Shann replied. “Why shouldn’t he?”

There was a silence. From some place in the grove of pines above the cottage, Lanna could hear the cawing of a crow. The sound came three times, and it was so real she might have paid little attention to it had she not been listening for it.

She turned away from the cupboard she was cleaning—an excuse to remain in the kitchen—and started to get her cloak. Then she hesitated, for the commissioner had erupted again.

“I’m getting tired of this runaround about Teacher,” he rumbled angrily. “Is he really alive? I’m beginning to doubt it. Now you listen to me.” A thick forefinger was thrust under Shann’s nose. “I’ve given your boys tools to cut the timber you promised, but you don’t get another thing until I see the logs on the beach—and the aircraft with them. I want the logs tied in rafts, and the aircraft taken apart so the pieces can be floated out on the rafts. Is that clear?”

“No aircraft,” Shann said mildly.

“Then you’ll get none of the cloth I brought, or the boots either!”

Lanna wanted the cloth—any kind of cloth—desperately, as did hundreds of other girls. But suddenly she found herself saying, “Keep your sleazy old stuff! We can do without it. Why, all the girls are weaving their own—and it’s so much better than what you showed us. That goes for the boots too. See?”

She held up the wool-and-linen cape that had taken so much time and effort to make, and thrust forth a tiny foot encased in a short woven boot. Before the discomfited commissioner could recover and begin asking questions she

preferred not to answer, she tossed the cape over her shoulders and started for the door.

"I'm going to find our ax," she told Shann.

The crow signal came again as she went outside.

At the corner of the cottage Lanna hesitated and looked carefully around to see if anyone might be watching. Reassured, she hastened through the trees in front of Shann's office and began climbing the slope on the other side.

Why, she thought unhappily, did anything as ordinary as cloth, which you couldn't do without, have to be so terribly difficult to make by hand? It wasn't just the weaving. That part of it she really enjoyed. But there was the endless preparation that came before—shearing the wool, planting the flax, and all the other steps you had to take without interrupting the main business of finding food enough to stay alive. You honestly couldn't blame some of the young ones for giving up on the extra work and turning into savages.

But the New Order's cloth would help. It *was* sleazy, of course. It was about the worst stuff she'd ever seen. Yet it was better than no cloth at all.

Halfway up the slope she stopped suddenly, thinking again of the thing she had nearly forgotten. It was something about the little aircraft that she and Mazal had used to fly up here. The twin of Teacher's craft. The big machine they'd followed—which Shann had flown packed with children—had been a sort of helicopter. But the little craft wasn't. It had been very different.

What was so different about it?

"Why," she said aloud, "it didn't have rotors!"

It didn't have wings, either—or anything that looked like a motor. With the heavy load she and Mazal piled inside, they barely managed to reach High Harbor. In fact, they came down in the woods two miles short of the harbor, and spent days carrying out the medical supplies. Oddly, they'd never gone back to the craft, and Mazal had hardly ever mentioned it—until last evening after she'd talked to Teacher.

"I don't know whether it's me or the weather," Mazal reported, "but I didn't have the least trouble receiving this time. Teacher says we're *not* to trade the aircraft, or any part of them, under any circumstances. I told him the little one was still hidden back in the woods, where we came down, and he said that was good, for he didn't want those people to even see it."

To Lanna, now, the reason was all at once clear. Into the building of the two craft, especially the little one, had gone secrets the New Order could not be trusted to have.

There had been more to Teacher's message, and at the thought of it she felt again a quick fury and a joy. Fury that the New Order would treat Westerners as they did, and joy that Teacher had actually seen Conan and spoken to him. Not that Conan was any better off, but now she knew for certain where he was, and his being near Teacher made her feel worlds closer to him.

The crow signal, somewhere near this time, brought Lanna back to the present and sent her hurrying up the slope. At the top she paused beside a twisted pine and searched the shadows on either side. She was careful not to turn her head too far, for the height gave a sweeping—and frightening—view of the sea.

"Jimsy?" she whispered.

A small, ragged figure, barefooted, redheaded, and incredibly freckled,

appeared from behind a tree. In one grubby hand he clutched a crude bow and two arrows. In the other he held a dead squirrel.

"Oh, Jimsy!" she exclaimed, stricken. "How *could* you? You've killed one of my pets!"

Eyes as hard and cold as agates surveyed her from under the red thatch. "I gotta eat. An' there's two others I gotta help feed."

"But there's fish!"

"Aw, fish," Jimsy said contemptuously. "You can have it. I want meat."

She sighed. Jimsy couldn't be more than ten, and he was growing up wild. Why he still came to the class she managed somehow to teach two mornings a week, she didn't know, but she was thankful that he remained her friend.

"Did you find our ax?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, where is it?"

Jimsy looked away and ran a pointed tongue over his grim mouth. "Orlo's got it."

"Oh, no!"

"That's why I didn't bring it."

"Where's Orlo's place?"

"What you wanna know for?"

"Because I want the ax—and I'm going to get it! Jimsy, that ax has to cut wood for twenty people. We simply can't do without it." It was more than just something to chop wood with, for it served as an all-around tool for a dozen purposes.

Jimsy licked his thin lips again. Finally he said, "I wouldn't go there if I was you."

"I certainly don't want to go," she admitted. "But who will do it for me?"

"There ain't nobody. All the guys are scared of him."

"Then it's up to me. How do I get there?"

"I—I can't tell you. It's a long way."

"Then take me close enough so I can find it alone. I'll never tell anyone you helped me."

"You promise?"

"Of course I promise! Now let's go."

When Jimsy finally left her, she was on a ridge far south of High Harbor. Somewhere below, on her right, was a ravine where Orlo's camp was hidden.

The area seemed vaguely familiar, but she did not recognize it until she had crept down to the ravine and saw the tiny stream. Her eyes widened at the sight of water trickling over the flat rocks, making a series of pools. She knew the pools instantly. They were just as they were five years ago, when she and Mazal had stopped here to drink. The only change was in the trees. They'd been a thick, feathery growth when she'd first seen them, just right for cushioning the fall of the little craft when Mazal had been forced to land.

She couldn't make out the craft now, for the trees had grown tall enough to hide it completely. But she knew exactly where it was.

For a moment she hesitated, knowing she would be foolish to go ahead. Then she thought of the precious ax. It was a slender tool of solid steel, light enough for a girl to use, and it had to serve everyone living at the south corner of the

harbor.

Her mouth set determinedly. She clenched her small hands and moved swiftly forward.

Suddenly she smelled meat cooking, and seconds later found herself on the edge of a partially cleared space. Directly in front of her a boy was crouched beside a smoldering fire, slowly turning something spitted on a green sapling held up by forked stakes. It looked like the whole carcass of a goat.

With one quick glance Lanna took in the empty huts and shelters on the right, the little aircraft that lay wedged in the trees like a flattened teardrop, and the pile of wood beyond the fire. The ax that had cut the wood lay on the ground beside it.

It seemed almost too good to be true to find Orlo's camp deserted save for the boy at the fire. The others were probably away foraging somewhere.

With her eye on the boy, whose back was to her, she slipped quietly around to the pile of wood. The ax was almost within reach when she heard a small metallic sound on her left. Her head jerked about, and she froze.

Orlo had just swung out of the little aircraft. He stood leaning against it, lazily chewing meat from a bone while he studied her insolently with narrowed eyes. He had the beginnings of a beard, of which he seemed very proud, for he kept twisting the point of it with his free hand. With his unkempt hair and soiled goatskin jacket he made her think of a young, and decidedly unpleasant, pagan deity she had once read about.

"Well, well, well!" he said softly. "Just look who's come to see papa!" Abruptly he flung the bone in the direction of the fire—an action that rewarded him with an instant yelp—and added, "Why didn't you tell me we had company, Limpy?"

"I—I didn't see her, Orlo!" Limpy protested. "Honest—"

"Someday, Limpy, I'm gonna slice you up in little frying-size pieces." Orlo's eyes flicked back to Lanna. "Oh, no you don't, chickie. The ax stays here."

"It does *not* stay here," she said coldly, picking it up. "You've another ax yonder!" She pointed to one with a broken handle. "Why don't you fix it? This one has to serve twenty people."

"Didn't you hear me? I said it stays here. *Put it down*."

Lanna ignored him and whirled away. She heard his swift approach, and knew she could have stopped it with the ax. But she could not bring herself to use it as a weapon.

She paid for her decision by having the ax snatched out of her hand. The next instant she received a vicious slap that sent her sprawling.

Somehow she got to her knees, her breath coming in frightened gasps. This was a different Orlo from the rebellious youth who had given Shann so much trouble over a year ago. This was a dangerous animal who had discovered he could do exactly as he pleased. In some part of her mind that continued to work in spite of the blow, she realized two things in an instant—Orlo was going to be a menace to all of High Harbor, and she would never leave here safely unless she managed to trick him.

"It's time you learned about me," she heard him say. "Get up, chickie. We gonna have a little talk. And don't try skipping off, or you'll really catch it."

She refused to move. I've got to make him knock me down again, she thought dazedly. And I must fall just right. But first I must make him mad.

“You’re the worst kind of scummy thief,” she began, with all the cold loathing she could muster. “The rest of us work hard for what we have, and we share it so everyone can eat. But you don’t do a thing to help. You steal. Anyone so low that he’d steal food from young ones half his size—”

“Shut up!”

“—is worse than a rat. And you’re stupid! You’re actually killing the poor animals we’re trying to save for wool—”

All at once, like a striking snake, his hand shot out and jerked her to her feet. The next instant she was reeling back from a tremendous blow against the side of her head. Only the rumpled hood of her cloak saved her from being knocked senseless. It was hard to keep her wits, but somehow she managed to fall close to the fire—so close that she could feel the hot ashes in her hands.

She forced herself to remain motionless until she heard him move close. Then she plunged her hands into the coals, whirled, and heaved burning coals and ashes directly into his face.

He yelled and began cursing as he clawed frantically at his eyes. Before he realized what she was doing, she was on her feet and swinging a stick she had snatched from the pile of wood.

It took three hard swings to knock Orlo down, but when he finally fell he lay still. She threw the stick at the gaping Limpy, sending him hobbling away from her, then she caught up the ax and ran.

5
PATCH

IT MAY HAVE BEEN MIDNIGHT, OR LONG AFTER, WHEN Conan became aware that someone was approaching. In his tiny prison he could only guess the time, for no clock struck the hour and no star was visible in the overcast sky. The darkness would have been absolute save for the feeble glow of light coming from the area of the administration building.

He had been given neither food nor water since leaving the survey boat, and by now his thirst had become a torment. Hopefully he peered through the wall slit on his right, trying to distinguish form and movement in the shadow. Before he could make out anything, he was startled by a low whisper at the edge of the slit.

"Conan?"

"Teacher!" he said hoarsely.

"S-s-s-sh! Never use that name while you are here." A bony hand came through the slit and gripped his own. "Just call me Patch, or even Patchy."

"Yes, sir. Lord, but it's good to see you! Of all the places to find you—I wouldn't have dreamed—"

"I've been here nearly four years. And of course I've been expecting you—but more of that later. Our time is short. Now listen carefully, son. I brought a plastic bag of water, and two rations of food. Eat every bit of the food before dawn. Don't leave even a crumb for somebody to find. After you've eaten, finish the water, every drop of it, and hide the bag until tomorrow night. You can roll it up and put it in your boot, or stuff it in a crack in the wall. Here's the food. Set it on the floor, then I'll slide the water bag through the window."

Conan recognized the food by the feel of it, for he had had it on the boat. It was a pair of sandwiches made of synthetic materials, obviously the product of machines. He thrust the unpalatable things in a corner and reached eagerly for the water bag. After untying the knot in the top, he let part of the contents trickle into his parched throat, then carefully retied the bag and placed it by the sandwiches.

"This place hasn't any regular guards," Teacher said quickly. "But someone's always on the prowl, checking on things. So I'll have to make this fast. Whatever they decide to do with you later, they'll punish you first. They'll hold you here with barely enough water to keep you alive. That's their way. It might be wise to do your sleeping during the day, and put on an act when anyone comes to have a look at you. Now, if matters turn bad and I have to free you, I'll find a way—"

"Don't worry about getting me out," Conan interrupted. "I can break down the door anytime. I was getting ready to smash it this afternoon, just before I saw you. If you hadn't come when you did—"

"Thank God I got here! It's almost impossible to escape from Industria alone.

Together, we'll have a chance." The old man paused and chuckled softly. "Ah, how I would have loved seeing what happened in the commissioner's office! You must have grown into a powerful fellow. But watch it, son. Don't lose your temper again, or we'll never make it."

"I'll be careful."

"You don't have to crawl. Just be negative."

"Yes, sir."

"Now here's the situation. I'm in the boat shop, and I need another helper—a strong one."

"I heard someone say you'd been trying to get more help."

Teacher chuckled again. "I started that talk long ago. I knew you were alive, just as Lanna knew it, and I was sure the survey ship would find you in time. So I've been getting ready. Now, if they won't let me have you in the shop, I've another plan—"

The old man broke off abruptly, then whispered, "Here comes a prowler. See you tomorrow night.…"

The prowler turned out to be someone on a clattering bicycle making a casual inspection of the waterfront. By the time the bicycle came close enough for its rider to flash a light into his cell, Conan was stretched upon the floor, apparently asleep. The food rations and water were tucked safely out of sight in a corner.

He finished the food and water before dawn, and hid the plastic bag in a deep crack in the wall. The long day that followed was much like the first. No one brought him anything, or even stopped to speak. He managed to sleep through the afternoon. When he awoke the workers were leaving the buildings on his left, and the survey vessel was no longer tied up at the distant pier. Evidently she had put to sea again in search of the man who was already here as a prisoner.

Early that night, long before Teacher was due, two bicycles clattered up and stopped, and a light played over him. He was surprised when a woman's voice ordered impersonally, "On your feet, brand. We've brought your water allowance. Drink it, and return the bottle."

A small plastic bottle was passed through the front opening, and another voice, also a woman's, said, "We advise you to drink it slowly. It will have to do you for two more days."

In spite of the water he had had last night, thirst was beginning to torment him once more, and he had no trouble finishing the bottle. Both women carried flashlights, and by the occasional flickers from them he saw that they were as old as Dr. Manski, and had the same cold grimness in their features. He suddenly wondered why everyone in this unpleasant place seemed to be middle-aged. Weren't there *any* young people here?

"You called me a brand," he said. "I thought I was supposed to be an apprentice citizen."

"As long as you have that cross on your forehead," one woman told him, "you'll be a brand to us. Frankly, we haven't too much use for brands. They're seldom to be trusted."

"Thank you," he muttered. "I'm surprised you even bothered to bring me water. Aren't you afraid to speak to me? Everyone else seems to be."

"We happen to be citizens first class," the other woman informed him sharply.

"And that gives you the right to speak?"

"It gives us many rights, including the use of bicycles."

"Oh. And all lower forms of life have to walk?"

"If you're below first class, and haven't grown wings, you can just bet you walk!"

Conan scowled at their dim faces. "If you are so important, why are you out doing guard duty at night?"

"Because the safety of Industria is our responsibility."

"And we can't leave it to inferiors," added her companion. "Too much can go wrong. A broken wire, a faulty valve—" She paused, and said, "But you need never trouble your head about responsibilities. With the points against you, it'll be a wonder if you ever make citizen third."

The other snorted. "He shouldn't be given the chance. Independence has warped his mind. He's as bad as that devilish old Patch."

"Who's Patch?" Conan asked innocently.

"Another brand who should have been disqualified. If I'd had my way—"

"But Patch is needed," said the other. "Who else can build boats? Frankly, if he's turned over to Patch, it ought to satisfy everyone."

"Everyone except Repko. You in there, if you're through with the bottle, pass it back. We can't stand here all night."

Conan was glad to see them go. Later that night, when he told Teacher about them, it brought forth an amused chuckle.

"Pair of harpies," said the old man. "They're not the worst here, but you'll find them typical of the first class. They're pretty tough."

"From all I've heard, you seem to have a reputation for being tough yourself."

"Yes. I've built it up carefully. Without it, we wouldn't be in a position to escape."

"How do you mean?"

"Son, I'm the only brand here with any kind of authority. I've had a chance at citizenship, but I've managed to keep away from it."

"But why? I should think that would be a help."

"Not at all. It would have taken me away from the boat shop, especially at night. Except for Tellit, the place is mine. I even sleep there."

"Who's Tellit? Your helper?"

"Yes. He's working for citizenship, and will do anything to get it. So don't trust him."

"A sort of rat, is he?"

"Indeed he is, poor fellow."

"Huh?" Conan stared through the slit at the old man. "Don't tell me you feel sorry for him!"

"But I do. The situation here—the way the New Order is set up to work—has brought out the worst in a lot of people. Very few of the brands can be trusted. And I doubt if there's one who would try to escape if he had the chance."

"But—but that's crazy! What's wrong with them?"

Teacher was silent a moment while he peered out into the night, listening. Reassured, he said quietly, "Conan, you forget what these people have been through, especially the brands. They haven't got your ability to survive. Those who managed to get here somehow, or were rescued and brought here, were starving. Some were half dead from exposure. When I came here—it was on a life

raft from one of the islands—I picked up two survivors on the way. This place looked like heaven to them. It still does. Try talking escape to any of them, and they'll tell you there's no place to go. And they'd be right. Just where *would* you go from here?"

"What's wrong with High Harbor?"

"*Every*thing's wrong with it. It's on the other side of an unknown sea—so it might as well be on another planet. The only men who know how to get there are the officers of the two big vessels. No one here wants to go to the place. They've heard too much about it. Things are bad there, and it's just a matter of time before Industria takes it over."

"No!"

"I'm afraid it's true, Conan. It's bound to happen—unless we can get there ourselves and think of some way to stop them."

"But how in the world are we going to get there?"

"You're going to take us."

"But—" Conan shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I'll explain it later. Other things come first. Repko has me worried. He wants you disqualified. That means the desert for you. Has anyone told you about it?"

"Dr. Manski did."

"Then you know the score. I've a friend of sorts at headquarters, and I'm praying he'll let me know in time to warn you if Repko has his way. Then you can break out at night and I'll hide you at the boathouse."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous for you?"

"Not for a night or two. And I'll need you there to help get ready."

Conan asked where it was, and learned he could reach it in total darkness merely by going two hundred paces up the waterfront.

"If you are forced to break out in daylight," Teacher added, "we'll have to change plans. Are you a good swimmer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then don't stop at the boathouse. Keep going on up the coast. You may have to go only five or six miles, or it may be double that distance. I'm not sure. I saw the spot only once, and I was so exhausted my judgment was poor."

"What's there?"

"A break in the cliff. It's where I stopped and spent the night four years ago, when I came here on the raft. It has a trickle of fresh water, so a person could hide there indefinitely. The spot is important to us. *Very* important. To escape from here we'll have to use it as a base."

"But someone must know of it. What about the men you brought here?"

"They don't remember it. They were too far gone. And no one ever goes in that direction. It's impassable—seemingly. High cliffs all the way."

"But how—"

"You'll have to swim around the worst spots. A good swimmer can do it easily. You see, there's no surf to worry about. Offshore reefs protect it. At low tide, you'll find a narrow bit of beach here and there."

The old man paused for a moment, listening. Then he added hastily, "I think our harpies are returning. There's just one thing more. If you fail to get away, and Repko takes you to the desert, wait till dark and cut over the hills to the cliffs. See you tomorrow…."

The days passed. A full week went by. Conan had learned patience on his islet, but now he was feeling like a caged animal. If he had not known that his presence at the shop was important to Teacher's plans, he would have smashed down the door and gone up the coast to wait.

On the tenth morning he was surprised to see Repko approaching with the other man he had marked. Repko unlocked the door and peered at him balefully a moment. Suddenly he gave an ominous jerk of his thumb.

"On your feet, brand. Out!"

Conan, who had slumped down quickly and was now feigning extreme weakness, got up slowly and staggered outside. Unconsciously his eyes went to the foreheads of both men, and he saw that their crosses had been removed.

Repko did not miss the glance. His pale, heavy features tightened with suppressed fury. He jerked Conan about and ordered hoarsely, "Get going!"

"Where are you taking me?"

It was not until they were in front of what was obviously a boat shop that Repko bothered to reply. "The others wanted you disqualified," he said, almost making the lie sound like truth. "But we decided to give you a chance. It's the only chance you'll get. Next time it'll be the desert." He raised his voice and called, "Patch! Where are you?"

"Hey? What is it?"

The irascible old fellow with the single glittering eye who appeared suddenly in the doorway couldn't possibly be Teacher. To Conan at that moment he seemed like a total stranger, and a very unpleasant one at that.

Repko said, "Here's that helper you wanted."

"Helper?" Patch rasped. "*Him?* Is this a joke?"

"Isn't this the fellow you asked for?"

"Phah! I asked for him a week ago. He's no good to me in the condition he's in!"

"Then feed him," Repko muttered, turning away from the fierceness of that coldly glittering eye. "He's your worry now."

As the two men hurried away, Patch broke into a furious tirade directed at the stupidity of humans and the unfairness of circumstance. In the middle of it he broke off and whirled upon a short fellow with bandy legs who had come to the door.

"What are you standing there gawking about, you butterfingered ape? Get moving! Draw an issue of clothes and a ration of slop for that prize package they brought us. And you—" Patch swung suddenly to Conan, and snarled, "You stink! Hop in the water yonder and wash it off—and don't take all day doing it. This is a boat shop, not a men's club. We have work to do!"

Conan was shaken by the blast, even though he knew it to be an act. The ill-tempered old crank was as opposite from Teacher as a man could be. But he was thankful for the opportunity to wash, and he drew off his filthy clothing and tottered, with a fine pretense of weakness, into the harbor.

Long before he was ready to crawl out, the bandy-legged helper, Tellit, appeared. The man brought clothing, a bottle of water, and food in a plastic container.

"Whew!" Tellit exclaimed, staring at Conan's lean body with its rippling muscles. "To see you with your clothes on, I wouldn'ta dreamed—" Then, "Shake

it up and get dressed! The old devil will make it hard on us both if you are slow."

Conan slapped himself partially dry and fumbled into the clean clothes. While he ate, Tellit spoke angrily about Patch.

"I hate his guts! He's a brand just like the rest of us—but does he ever help you? No! He'll downgrade you and rob you every time!"

"Rob you? Of what?"

"Of points! That's all we've got here. Points. It takes a thousand points to make citizen third. You know what that dirty old buzzard did to me last month? I had nine hundred points. But would he give me a break and put in a good report so I could get more? No! He marked me down and I lost thirty points! All because I goofed on a couple things and spoiled some plastic."

"For just a brand, how did he manage to get so much power?"

"Because the old devil knows boats."

"But—" Conan frowned, finding it hard to associate Teacher with anything nautical. "There ought to be a lot of people here who could build something as simple as a boat."

"In a city full of lab workers? Pshaw." Tellit spat, and glanced uneasily at the shop. "This place wasn't even on the sea until the Change. Oh, they had a channel cut to the coast, but that didn't make boatbuilders out of anybody. Sure, there were a few who *thought* they could build one—till they tried. Old Patch saw what they were doing, and said the thing would break apart when it hit rough water. They laughed at 'im and said who'd he think he was, Briac Roa? Well, the boat *did* break up. Five men drowned. So old Patch got his chance. He's been running the shop ever since."

Tellit spat again. "You see, a boat's *not* simple, even the simplest ones. That's what fooled me. When the work commissioner got sore at me, and turned me over to Patch for punishment, I thought I'd get smart and learn about boats—then *I*'d be on top. But it's no go. I never saw anything so complicated. I'd give my soul to get away from this place."

"You mean you'd like to escape?"

Tellit stared at him. "Escape from what? I mean get away from the shop."

"But wouldn't you rather leave Industria?"

"Huh? You got rocks in your head? Why, a man would be a fool to want to get away from Industria!"

"You don't mind being a slave?"

"Sure I mind—but if I watch my points, I'll soon be citizen third. Then I'll be on the way up. Once you're a proper citizen, this is a pretty good town. You get all kinds of privileges. But you gotta learn the ropes, and play it cozy with the boys on top. If old Patch had done that, he'd at least be citizen second by now. But he's such a crank and a fool he doesn't care what he says to people. So instead of gaining points, he's always losing 'em. I've heard he's almost three thousand points behind. Can you beat that? Of course, it's turned into a sort of joke by now, and he's so crazy he doesn't give a hoot. Still—"

They were interrupted by a shout from the boathouse, and a sudden blast of language that brought them to their feet like puppets on strings. "Get in here and act alive, you worthless pair of deadheads! You've been vacationing long enough. We've got a ship to build!"

The ship turned out to be a plastic-and-metal trawler, some fifty feet in length,

with a high bow for heavy weather and a broad deck aft for handling nets. Her staunch framework, partially covered with sheets of thick plastic, nearly filled the main shed and left little room at the end for several small boats that were being built at the same time.

Conan was put to work helping Tellit clamp and fasten the plastic sheets to the framework, which was of heavier plastic reinforced with aluminum.

"We don't have any steel here," Tellit informed him, as he payed the seams with a reeking bonding fluid. "All we have is a little bit of aluminum, and we gotta make it stretch. Most of it has to go for motors."

"How long will it take to finish a boat this big?" Conan asked, instantly deciding that the trawler was the craft Teacher intended to use for their escape. One glance told him that the little boats were entirely too small. Only something as large and as powerful as the trawler could possibly take them across the dangerous waters he had been watching for the past five years.

"Dunno," Tellit replied. "We been on this job six months already. Even with you helping, it'll take another six months before we can launch her. That is, if the motor's ready."

"Motor?"

"Yeah. They gotta make one special for this baby. There's the model for it yonder. Patch wants to try it out on that little runabout he's finishing to see how it handles."

With a sudden sinking sensation inside, Conan glanced at the corner of the shop where Patch was busy cementing the stern in one of the boats. Would he be forced to spend the next six months here, working to complete the trawler, before there was any possibility of escaping? Or did Teacher have something else in mind?

At twilight a bell rang, and he went with Tellit to a local food booth, signed a ration card that had already been punched for his earlier meal, and drew a packaged dinner. They ate by the boat basin in front of the shop.

"You gotta be a citizen third before you can go into a place with tables," Tellit grumbled. "I'm sure getting tired of being a brand. We have the longest hours, do most of the work, and have none of the privileges. All I need to get this blasted cross off my forehead is a hundred and thirty points. But they're going to be the hardest points I've ever earned."

"But just how do you get your points? By turning out a lot of work, and not making any mistakes?"

"Don't kid yourself!" The little man spat, and his eyes narrowed. "You'd be a brand the rest of your life if you played it straight. Like I said before, you gotta be cozy with the right people. Find out what they want to know, and tell 'em. See?"

"You mean to—to turn informer?"

"I don't like that word," Tellit snapped. "But in a place like this, it's every man for himself. If I spotted you sleeping on the job, or stealing, I'd be a fool not to report it. It's the same with everybody."

"I'd rather revolt than turn informer," Conan said grimly. "What's the matter with all the captives here? Aren't there enough of them to fight for their rights?"

"You don't understand. You can't fight the setup."

"Why not? Who's to stop you? There are no police."

"Pshaw! We're *all* of us police. See? We brands are scattered everywhere in the factory area, and there's no chance to meet and plan anything without being reported."

"But what about nights? Where do you sleep?"

"In the local bunkhouse, two to a cell."

"Cell? You mean you're locked in?"

"We're not locked in, but we might as well be. A brand's not allowed out after the last bell. If we're caught, we're in trouble. Every bunkhouse has a citizen second in charge, and if we don't watch our step, we're in trouble again. Everybody's out for points, so it means everybody's watching us. When we're in trouble, it means we lose points or part of our food ration. If it happens too often, we're disqualified. Now d'you get it?"

"I get it," Conan said slowly.

"Then watch your step—and pray old Patch doesn't keep you at the boathouse nights."

"Huh? Is he likely to?"

"He did me. Until I'd learned the ropes here. Used to keep me awake half the night, making me do this or that till I was ready to kill 'im. Boy, was I glad to go back to the bunkhouse and get some sleep!"

The sudden ringing of the bell drove them to work again.

The long twilight deepened. It was almost dark when the next bell rang. Tellit put his tools away and said wearily to Conan, "Let's go. There's a spare bunk for you at my place."

"Oh, no you don't!" old Patch rapped out. "Boy, you're bunking right here on the floor till you learn the difference between a fid and a fiddlehead. Y'hear me?"

"Y-yes, sir," Conan faltered, and slumped down on the floor with a fine pretense of utter exhaustion.

The moment Tellit was out of sight, Patch chuckled softly and said in the voice of Teacher, "Sometimes I almost hate myself. What a nasty old devil I am!"

"You certainly are, sir! But I can see the reason for it now."

"Well, we've work to do. Are you as near collapse as you appear?"

"Of course not! I could work all night."

"Good! You may have to. If we can get ready tonight, we'll leave this place tomorrow."

Conan sat up, his face blank with astonishment. "You—how—but I thought it would be months before the trawler—"

"Oh, good heavens, son, that craft would never do. We need sail." The old man tugged at one of the small boats he had been working on and pointed to another in the dim corner of the shop. "Drag that one here."

Wondering, Conan did as he was told. Though he knew practically nothing about boats, it was apparent that the squat, ugly little runabout would never do for an ocean voyage, even for one person. He glanced at Teacher, puzzled.

"Turn it around," the old man ordered. "Put the two boats together, stern to stern."

Conan joined the boats, then stepped back and looked at them. He gasped. The ugliness had vanished. In the fading light it seemed that he was peering at a single hull, pointed at either end, with the long, flowing lines of a sailing craft.

"Why," he whispered, "I—I wouldn't have believed it! How did you do it? I

mean, I didn't know—"

"That I knew about boats? They were my first love." Teacher moved to the door, listened a moment, then said, "The trick was to design what we needed, and build it without anyone realizing what we were doing. This was the only answer. It needs a keel—or a substitute for one—but we'll take care of that later, at the place I told you about. Now, here's the plan.…"

Tomorrow night, the old man explained, they would load both boats with the equipment they needed, and use the model for the trawler motor to take them up the coast to the break in the cliff. There, the two boats would be permanently joined, and rigged with a sail which they would make on the spot.

"But first," Teacher added, "there are some things we must have. To get them will require your strength. You see, we must break into a building and commit burglary."

6
DANGER

THEY NEEDED PACKAGED BREAD AND OTHER FOOD THAT would keep indefinitely, as well as cloth and a roll of plastic. To burglarize the storehouse where these items were kept it was decided to wait till midnight. By then the roving watchmen would have finished their early rounds, and the way should be safer.

When it was black dark Teacher went out by the boat basin to call Mazal at High Harbor. Conan rolled in a blanket in the corner of the shop and tried to rest. He was tired, more so than he'd admitted, but at the moment sleep seemed impossible. A nameless fear had begun to trouble him. He laid it to the uncertainties ahead and tried to put it from his mind.

What was High Harbor like now? As he tried to imagine what the Change had done to it, he wished again that he had a little of Teacher's ability as a communicator. If only he and Lanna had been taught the way Mazal was taught —but in those days, with the war suddenly expanding, there hadn't been time. All at once, as a remembered vision of Lanna rose in his mind, he had an almost overwhelming desire to see her as she was now. Could he?

Maybe, if he turned all his thoughts upon her, he could banish distance and somehow manage to see her again even if they couldn't actually talk together.…

At the moment Conan was concentrating upon her, Lanna was waiting impatiently in the cottage for Mazal to return from the tower. Here, on the other side of the sea, so far to the west, it was still daylight, though already the evening chill was creeping down from the heights. Lanna shivered and closed the door she had partially opened. At that instant there came to her a brief but startlingly clear vision of Conan, not as she had seen him last, but older and stronger as she knew he must be now. She even saw the mark on his forehead.

Had she recognized what was happening, and managed to blank everything else from her mind, she might have made her first contact with him. But other matters suddenly demanded her attention.

First, she was startled by hearing Jimsy's crow signal coming from the slope behind the cottage. Jimsy had been absent from her morning classes, and she hadn't seen him since she recovered the ax. Hearing him call now, so late in the day, was upsetting; he'd never done this before. Not, of course, that there was any reason why he shouldn't call her at any hour if he had something important to tell her.…

Jimsy's signal came again, and now she was aware of the urgency in it. What could have happened?

She opened the door and glanced at the tower, hoping to see Mazal returning. Irresolute, she hesitated, torn between the immediacy of Jimsy and her concern for Conan and her grandfather. Yesterday Teacher had told Mazal that the time

of escape was near, that it might come within a day or two. Maybe, even now … Abruptly she shook her head, closed the door once more, then caught up her cape and sped like a pale wraith through the dimness of the cottage.

At the front entrance she stopped quickly at the sound of footsteps on the porch, and moved aside just as the door was thrust open. Shann entered.

"Off to the ball, so early?" he said, making a weary attempt at being lighthearted.

For a moment she was unable to respond. "I—Jimsy's calling me," she told him. "I'm afraid something's happened." Then she made out the deeper lines in his face, and remembered he'd been away since dawn.

"Wha—what's wrong, Shann?"

He eased the door shut and leaned against it, closing his eyes. "A virus," he said softly. "It's broken out at the other end of the harbor. Six of the young ones are down with it already. And I don't have anything for it."

Her dark eyes widened in swift alarm. This was the sort of thing poor Shann had been afraid of for five years. So far they'd been lucky, for nothing dangerous and highly contagious had appeared here. But now …

"And you think it's—serious?"

"Yes. It's something new—at least to me. I think the trade ship brought it. The crew are probably immune. But the young ones—it hit them last night, and three of them are unconscious already. Er—have you seen Dyce?"

Lanna shook her head. The commissioner had not been around for two days.

"I've got to find him," Shann said. "He's not a doctor, but he knows a little medicine, and he's got a lot of Pharmaceuticals on board. He might be able to help us."

"Maybe Jimsy can tell us about him. I'll ask."

She threw on her cloak and ran outside. Near the office she paused just long enough to make sure no one was watching, then hastened up through the woods to the twisted pine at the top of the slope.

Jimsy was crouched against the tree. In the fading light his small, ragged body seemed almost part of the growth around him. Only his unkempt mop of red hair stood out brightly against the shadows. As he rose painfully to his feet she saw that the left side of his face was badly bruised and swollen, and the eye nearly closed.

"Jimsy!" she cried. "What in the world—have you been in a fight?"

"Aw, forgit it," he growled. "I'm O.K."

"But you're hurt! You'd better come down right now and have the doctor—"

"Naw! I said I was O.K., didn't I?" Jimsy paused, and his hard eyes bored up into hers. "You heard about the meeting?"

"What meeting?"

"Then you ain't heard. It's tomorrow about this time, over at that place on the road. And Orlo, he's back of it."

A new fear, sharper than the others, suddenly cut into her. That "place on the road" was on the other side of the ridge where an old highway, useless since the Change, curved past what had once been a roadside park. The spot was the nearest large open area, and the kids often met there for games and talks.

"Jimsy, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, a—a lot of the guys don't like the way Doc's trying to hold 'em down. I

mean, they and the girls want things he don't figger they oughta have, see? From the trade ship, I mean. Like bicycles an' music boxes—"

"But, Jimsy, we need other things *far* more! Don't you realize—"

"It ain't *me* wants 'em. What use would *I* have for a music box? Some dirty skunk'd swipe it from me anyway. And Orlo, he'll wind up owning everything. You see, he wants to take over."

"*What?*"

"He—he wants to kick Doc out an' be the big boss here."

She could only stare at him in shocked silence.

"An' that ain't all," the boy muttered. "Orlo, he's got it in for you. I mean, I—I seen what happened when you got the ax back."

"You—you were watching?"

"Yeah. Sorta figgered he'd get mean, so I was ready to pop 'im with an arrer. But you got away O.K." He stopped and suddenly said, "You sure nobody seen you meet me up here?"

"Jimsy, I'm *always* careful. The only person who knows I'm with you now is the doctor. But I *had* to tell him, because—"

"Aw, he's aw'right. I reckon Orlo just made a good guess."

"Guess about what? Jimsy, was it Orlo that gave you a beating?"

Jimsy shrugged. "It don't matter."

"Then it *was* Orlo—and it *does* matter! Oh, that dirty animal!" She clenched her hands in sudden fury. "He did it because he thought you told me about the ax!"

Another shrug. "I said it don't matter none. Anyway, I ain't gonna forgit it. I'll fix 'im." He turned away, saying, "I hope it rains or something tomorrow. It sure ain't gonna be good if that goat robber comes here an' takes over."

"Jimsy—wait! We've got to find the commissioner. It's terribly important. Have you seen him anywhere?"

"Yeah. I seen 'im." Jimsy's hard, freckled features became a little more grim. "He's been with Orlo all day."

"Orlo!"

"Yeah. Them two, I think they made a deal. The commissioner, he's gonna be at the meeting tomorrow."

"Oh, no!"

"That's what I heard. I think they're both out at the trade ship now."

Again shock held her silent. She hardly saw Jimsy leave. When she finally turned, fighting back a growing dread, she was momentarily forgetful of her enemy beyond the land, and failed to lower her eyes in time. So abruptly she saw it in all its menacing vastness—the great shrouded, darkling sea that had swallowed continents and drowned the past, the ever deadly sea that seemed to be coiled and waiting. It was all in shadow save for a single spot of reflected light that glared at her from the horizon like a monster eye.

She cried out against it and might have panicked if Tikki, who had been circling watchfully overhead, had not dipped lower and lighted on her arm. Thankfully she clutched the bird to her and fled down through the twilight.

In the corner of the boat shop Conan awoke suddenly with the pressure of a hand upon his shoulder.

Teacher's voice came quietly out of the darkness. "It's time, son. We'll have to work fast."

Conan thrust the blanket aside and rolled to his feet, almost instantly wide awake. It surprised him that he'd been asleep at all, for it seemed that only seconds had passed since he'd been thinking of Lanna and High Harbor. Remembering his effort, he felt a little depressed. He'd never make a communicator.

Before he could ask Teacher if Mazal had sent a message from Lanna, the old man pressed a flashlight into his hand and said, "Follow me, son. Don't use the light unless you need it, and turn it only on the ground to see where I am."

"If you're going to lead, hadn't you better carry it?"

"No, it wouldn't help. I'm practically blind."

"You're *what?*"

Teacher chuckled softly. "I've always been nearly blind. I thought you knew. Happened when I was a child, fooling with chemicals. Without glasses—they were lost the night of the Change—I can make out just enough to draw my boat plans. But it made disguise a simple matter. Even without a beard, take away a man's glasses, give him a patch in place of a glass eye, and who would know him?"

"You certainly fooled me! But how in the world can you find your way—"

"In the dark? Easily. I have other senses. Let's go!"

As he followed the swift feet of his guide through the blackness, Conan for the first time in his life began to regard Teacher with something of the awe with which the entire world had once looked upon him. That this tall and almost frail-looking old man was Briac Roa, the greatest mind of an era, had meant little to him. He'd always accepted him simply as Teacher, a beloved friend. So, now, it was not the realization that this was the genius who had produced so many marvels that suddenly aroused his awe. It was the simple but obvious fact that a man who was nearly blind had somehow trained himself to see in the dark.

How did he do it?

All at once, as he thought back, Conan remembered an evening long ago when Teacher had been trying to improve Mazal's ability as a communicator. "You must learn to *visualize,*" Teacher had said. "Understand? When you talk to me at a distance you must think of me so intently that you actually see me."

"But, Father, that's impossible!"

"Nonsense. I always see you, no matter how far away you are. What I can do, you can learn to do."

"But—but I can't believe that," she'd protested. "You have so much more ability—"

"Nonsense again. I should have taken up your training earlier instead of leaving it to others. Like everyone else, you haven't been taught to use your mind. You've been taught *not* to use it."

At that point Mazal had shaken her head helplessly. But Teacher, not to be stopped, had said, "You've been taught *not* to use it by having it impressed upon you that certain things are impossible. You are certain, for instance, that it is impossible for a blind man to ever learn to see. Yet I say he can. Once he learns to visualize—"

"Oh, *Father!*"

But here was Teacher, years later, not only proving the point but proving a greater truth as well. To Conan, at that moment, it was like the opening of a magic door.

With hardly a pause the old man led him through stygian alleyways, past black buildings reeking of chemicals and others aglow with eerie lights. They stopped finally in the rear of a windowless structure made of long sheets of heavy plastic.

Teacher stood a moment, listening. Then he quickly unrolled a bundle he carried and gave Conan a short metal wrecking bar. After tapping several of the sheets with his fingertips, he whispered, "We'll try it here. Pry out the lower fastenings, then bend the sheet aside. Easy …"

Conan proceeded carefully. It was now that the nameless fear he'd felt earlier suddenly returned, stronger. Something was wrong, very wrong. But what could it be?

Gaining entry into the building was easier than he'd thought. Teacher followed him inside and divided his bundle, which proved to be several huge plastic bags. They found what they wanted without trouble, filled the bags, and returned the way they had entered. Conan's load was far larger and heavier than Teacher's, and he was forced to remove some of the bulkier things from one of the bags before he could pass it through the opening. He did this, and was replacing the articles he had taken out, when he noticed that Teacher was crouched on the ground a few feet away. The old man seemed to be examining something.

"What's the matter?" Conan whispered.

"I'm not sure yet. It could be a great deal."

Conan played his light briefly on the ground, but saw only a long crack where the paving had pulled away from the building. Why be concerned about a crack? They were all over the waterfront.

But something was definitely wrong, for Teacher returned to the shop by a different route, and stopped every few yards for a brief study of the paving. Nor did he want to talk about it later. "Get some sleep, son," he ordered, when they had hidden their bags in the adjoining storeroom. "I'm afraid tomorrow is going to be a hard day."

It was a bad day from the beginning, and it seemed to Conan that it would never end. He awoke with the same nameless fear he had had the evening before, and it remained with him, growing as the hours passed. There was no question that Teacher, who had turned into the irascible Patch with Tellit's arrival, was deeply troubled about something. The old man spent most of his time at the drawing table in the storeroom, writing long equations on the thin scraps of plastic that served as paper.

Tellit noticed the difference, for once he motioned toward the storeroom and muttered, "What's happened to *him*? He swallow his tongue?"

"I wish I knew!" Conan said fervently.

Late that afternoon Patch ordered them to get one of the small boats ready for testing the model motor. They placed the motor in the well built for it in the stern, clamped it in place, and trundled the craft down to the basin. When it was afloat, Patch scowled at it, then had them bring down an assortment of heavy articles for ballast. These, Conan noticed, turned out to be such useful items as spare batteries, a box of tools, and even the cans of cement that would be needed

later to join the hulls.

"This test is for a work boat," the old man snapped. "Get more weight into it! That motor's got to handle a load. And while you're about it," he added, seemingly as an afterthought, "bring the other boat here and try it on a towline."

When the final bell rang at dusk, Conan was still at the basin, finishing his first lesson in seamanship. Both boats had been partially loaded, and needed only the two bags of supplies and a few extra items to be ready for departure. By now Conan's worry had become all he could bear.

"What's gone wrong?" he blurted as soon as Tellit had left for the bunkhouse.

"Geology," Teacher said softly. "It's rather messed things up for us."

"But I don't—You said *geology?*"

"Yes. The Change did a lot of damage to the earth's crust. The crust broke fairly cleanly for a great distance in this area, and took part of Industria with it. But it left fractures. There's a bad fracture under us, as I discovered when I first came here. The strain on it is increasing. From what I saw last night, I'm afraid it's reached a critical point."

For a moment Conan could only gape at him. "You—you mean there's going to be a quake or something here?"

Teacher sighed. "I mean, son, that half the remaining city is going to break away and slide into the sea."

"You—you're sure?"

The moment he spoke he realized he was questioning the man who had predicted the Change. He was questioning Briac Roa, who had told the world exactly what would happen if magnetic power was used as a weapon. The generals hadn't wanted to believe him. They must have it, they said, to shatter the force fields over the cities. So the planet had been shaken from its axis, and the generals were now under the sea.

"I—I'm sorry, sir," Conan faltered. "I didn't mean—"

"It's all right, son. I'm sure enough to know that only a miracle can prevent it. It could happen any time—without proper instruments, it's impossible to say exactly." The old man shook his head. "But it will happen, and without warning. It's a monstrous trap. The people must be warned."

A knot of coldness was gathering in Conan's stomach. Suddenly he said, "Why couldn't we leave a message for Tellit to hand over to Headquarters? If you wrote it out carefully—"

"Do you think such a message would be believed?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because there's no one here who understands these things. And they all think of me as Patch. Even if I signed my real name, they'd say old Patch's mind had finally cracked."

"Suppose they did?" Conan retorted. "What more can you do? We certainly don't owe them anything!"

"We owe them something."

"For what? For branding us?" Conan clenched his fists.

Teacher shook his head. "Every man owes his brother a helping hand when he's in trouble. They're in deadly peril here."

"Then let them stay in peril! Why should we go out of our way to help the New Order? Look what they've done! I say, let 'em drown! The world would be

better off if they were all dead! The whole dirty bunch—"

"Conan! Listen to me!"

"Y-yes, sir." The coldness in him tightened. He could see what was coming, and the thought of it filled him with dread. It was almost dark, and in a few minutes it would be safe to finish loading the boats. If he could think of some way to get Teacher away from here …

"No, you're not to try and stop me," the old man said quickly, as if reading his mind. "In half an hour there'll be a meeting of the commissioners. I intend to be there. And I'll tell them who I am. It's the only possible way—"

"But you can't! They'd never let you go! Please—"

"Listen to me, son. When this fracture breaks, every bit of food-making apparatus will be lost—unless people start moving it immediately. It's their only chance to survive."

"But—"

"Let me finish." Teacher swung around and pointed. "Can you make out that big rock from here? It's about two miles up the coast, and just offshore."

"It's too dark to see it now, but I know where it is. I noticed it earlier."

"Good. Your job is to take the boats up there and wait for me. If all goes well, I'll meet you there at dawn."

"But—but suppose—"

"That I run into trouble?" Teacher shrugged. "That's a chance we'll have to take. The tide will be low at dawn, and if you don't see me wading out to the rock, get under way fast for that other place I told you about. In the toolbox you'll find some instructions I've written down for you. They'll tell you exactly what to do."

They'll tell me, Conan thought, how to rig the boat and sail away without him. But that I'll never do. Never.

His jaws knotted as he watched the harbor darken. So much could happen between now and dawn.

7
FLIGHT

THE MOTOR, POWERED BY A BATTERY UNDER THE SEAT, was almost noiseless as it thrust the boats slowly through the darkness. The only sounds were the night breeze and the rustling of the incoming tide, combined with a soft gurgling astern made by water being forced from the motor's jet chamber. A child could have managed the thing, so simple was it to run. But Conan was suddenly faced with complications he had not anticipated, and every passing minute added to them.

The first step was to navigate safely the channel that led from the basin. This was no more than a sunken street, bordered on either side by submerged structures.

Earlier, it had seemed the easiest of tasks to run the length of the channel to deep water, and then swing right in the direction of the rock. To help him hold a straight course, Teacher had given him a homemade compass to place between his feet, and a flashlight with a bit of red plastic tied over it. The plastic was to dim the light, not only so that no one would notice it ashore, but also to enable him to see the compass needle without ruining his night vision. But navigating by compass, he quickly discovered, was something that couldn't be learned in a moment—especially in the dark with nothing visible ahead to guide him.

In the first few minutes he ran out of the channel twice, and scraped over submerged objects, before he realized he was not making proper allowance for the tide. Then he made the discovery, known to every experienced sailor, that at night he could see far better out of the corner of his eye than directly in front of him. This enabled him to reach the end of the channel without further trouble.

He thought his difficulties were over when he finally turned right in deep water and headed northward. But by now the night had darkened, and a thin mist was creeping around him. He seemed to be moving in a void. When he tried to check his course with the compass, he was dismayed to see the needle spinning erratically.

This whole area, he realized, must be filled with sunken equipment that would affect a compass. But knowing the cause of it was hardly a help. How was he going to find the rock before dawn?

The tide, as nearly as he could judge, seemed to have been quartering in that general direction. Maybe it would be wiser just to drift with the tide. With the motor running he could easily miss his destination entirely, and even be carried out to sea.

He turned off the switch and sat listening and searching the dark while he drifted. At the time he'd left the basin, there'd been no doubt in his mind that the night lights in the food factories would always be shining as a beacon, so that he couldn't possibly go astray. But now he was unable to make out the faintest gleam of a light in any direction. Nor was there a sound, save the slapping of

wavelets against the two boats and the vague murmur of the wind.

It seemed impossible that he could have become lost so quickly. But lost he was, and until the compass straightened out there wasn't much he could do about it.

To avoid thinking of what might be happening to Teacher, he turned his mind to High Harbor and Lanna. Never had she seemed so far away as she did now, in this hour of escape.…

Lanna, at this moment, was praying for rain. Not that rain would solve anything, but at least it would make it impossible to hold the meeting tonight. And by the time another date would be set, maybe she could quietly have enough young people lined up to put a stop to Orlo.

So far she and Mazal had managed to talk to only a few, for someone had to stay close to the office whenever Shann was away. If the office nurse was more often herself, it was only right. In emergencies she was better than Mazal at splinting fractures and sewing up cuts. Tomorrow she planned to organize the neighboring young ones and have them go around and talk to the various groups, which were scattered all over. Those nearer the community farm, of course, were probably hopeless, because Orlo had already frightened them. Orlo did no work whatever—but he always took the best of everything that grew, and no one dared try to stop him.

But Orlo had to be stopped.

Please, she prayed. Let it rain. Let it rain, and rain, and rain!

Then she realized she ought to be praying for the young ones who were sick, and for Teacher and Conan who even now might be trying to escape. Last evening Mazal hadn't been able to receive a thing. But this was another evening, and maybe something would come through.

The deepening twilight reminded her there was a great deal of work to be done before dark. She flew through the kitchen, building up the smoldering fire, filling the kettle, setting the table, and putting out cold fish and odds and ends left over from yesterday. The meal looked awfully skimpy, for there'd been no time to cook since breakfast, but maybe she could find something fresh in the garden.

Outside, she instantly forgot the garden when she saw Mazal coming from the tower. One look at her aunt's drawn face and her spirits sank to a deeper low.

"What's happened, Mazal?"

"I couldn't get a word. Not a word. Of all times! I—is Shann back yet?"

"No." Shann had been gone all day.

"Oh, dear. That virus, or whatever it is, must be spreading." Mazal shook her head. "I—I wish something good would happen."

Her aunt, Lanna saw, was badly upset and on the point of tears. In her own anxiety she almost felt that way herself.

"Mazal, can't you tell me what's wrong?"

"That's just the trouble," Mazal wailed. "*I don't know*. All I can get is a *feeling.*" They went on into the kitchen as they spoke, and sank down at the table. Now Mazal added helplessly, "It's that awful sick-in-the-stomach, bad sort of feeling you get when the bottom's dropped out of everything. Something's gone wrong. I just know it. Something's happened that's going to keep them from escaping."

"Don't talk that way, Mazal."

"I can't help it. I can't shake the feeling. Something's happened. I'll bet they've found out who Teacher is."

"No!"

"I'll just bet they have. And if I'm right, they'll *never* get away!"

"Conan will manage somehow."

Mazal stared at her. "You've got a tremendous lot of confidence in Conan, haven't you?"

The question startled Lanna. She'd never thought about it in just that way. But it was true. A thousand little things, going back to the time when she was little, had created that confidence. And not the least of it was the way Teacher felt about him.

She told Mazal, "I heard Teacher say once that if he ever had to find someone to do what couldn't be done, he wouldn't have to look any farther than Conan. And that was a long time ago, when Conan was only—"

She was interrupted by a loud knocking upon the front door. It was an imperative sound that brought her to her feet and drove her resentfully through the cottage with Mazal at her heels. She knew that knock.

Upon opening the door she was confronted by the blocky, black-bearded figure she had expected to see.

"Where's the doctor?" Commissioner Dyce demanded. "He promised to meet me in his office, but there's no sign of him."

"Some of the young ones are sick," said Lanna. "I'm afraid he's been delayed."

"I'm not in the habit of being kept waiting. If he expects me to do favors for him—"

"*Favors?*" Mazal cut in sharply, as if she couldn't believe her ears.

The commissioner glared at her, then turned as someone came stumbling down from the shadows of the pines.

"Shann!" Mazal cried, and ran out to him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," Shann mumbled. He came slowly up the steps with her, dropped his bag, and stood leaning against the wall while he looked at the commissioner. In his eyes was something Lanna had never seen in them before. He was the mildest and kindest of persons, but this evening he was almost frightening. What could have happened?

"Last night," Shann said softly, "I begged you for help. You refused to give it. Today I begged you again—and again you refused me."

"You know why," snapped the commissioner. "I've no authority to give away medical supplies without permission."

"Are you such an unfeeling octopus that you have to have permission to do a simple act of mercy?"

"Mind your tongue with me, Doctor! I told you I would radio home for instructions, and that I would discuss the matter with you here this evening. Now didn't I?" The black beard was thrust forth menacingly.

"So you did. And now you've finally brought what I need—about ten hours too late."

"Eh? Too late for what?"

"To save a little girl," Shann replied, almost in a whisper. "Her name—but it would mean nothing to you, and now it no longer matters. I've just come from

burying her."

Lanna gasped, and caught Mazal's stricken look. But before either of them could say anything, Shann spoke again, his voice suddenly harsh.

"So you've brought your pills, enough to immunize everybody. But I'm sure there'll be a price. What are you charging for them, Commissioner?"

The envoy of the New Order did not even bat an eye. "The two aircraft," he said promptly.

Shann drew a long breath. "I can't fight you now. Take the aircraft. But you'll have to make your own arrangements about removing the smaller one."

"I've already made arrangements," came the smug reply. "There's just one more thing."

"We've made our deal! Now let's have those pills!"

"Not—so—fast, Doctor. The aircraft are utterly worthless without a small part that has been taken from the mechanism of each. I want those parts."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," Shann faltered.

"Don't trifle with me, Doctor! You *must* know." Menacingly the commissioner tapped a plastic case he was carrying under one arm. "I have in here enough units to give everyone in High Harbor complete immunization. But without those parts you'll get not a one."

"I told you I know nothing about them!" Shann cried, exasperated. "What kind of wretch are you that would let children die—"

"Wait a minute," Mazal interrupted. "I remember …" She struck her clenched hands together, then added tensely, "Years ago Teacher told me to take those parts and keep them in a safe place—" Abruptly she whirled and ran into the cottage. She was back in seconds with a pair of small but heavy metallic boxes wrapped in thin plastic.

"Are these what you want? Teacher called them converters."

"Converters," said Dyce, his rumbling voice almost a purr. "Exactly." He opened his case, removed several transparent bags filled with tiny blue pellets, replaced them with the two metallic boxes, and closed the case with the air of a man very pleased with what he has done.

"I trust," he said, turning to leave, "that everyone is happy."

"I'm not," said Shann, thrusting the bags of pellets into Mazal's hands. "Just a moment!"

"Well?"

"Before you go, Commissioner, I'd better set some things straight. I'm not such a fool that I don't know what you're up to here. I'm certain now that you turned this virus loose on us purposely."

"Nonsense! If you don't watch your tongue—"

"You dirty liar," Shann told him in a shaking voice, "I know what you did! You and the New Order will stoop to anything to get what you want. You could have given us this stuff last night. You didn't need permission. So that not only makes you a liar, but a murderer. You would kill children! If you could have seen that little girl—"

"Shut up!" Dyce suddenly shot forth a big hand and straight-armed Shann with a force that sent the frail doctor staggering backward against the wall. It knocked the breath out of him. But only for a moment.

Gasping, Shann sprang toward the outthrust beard and seized it with both

hands. He jerked, and there was such a burst of pent-up fury behind the jerk that Dyce was hurled down the steps and thrown flat on his back in the yard.

Shann leaped after him and snatched up a stone that edged the walk. “You damnable monster!” he cried. “Get out of my sight before I brain you!”

Lanna was not even aware that she had followed Shann until the commissioner had scrambled out of the yard and vanished in the dusk. Then she saw the heavy stick in her hand. It was one Mazal always kept on the porch for climbing, but she had no memory of getting it. She trembled and dropped the thing, and instantly forgot it as the first raindrops splashed in her face.

It was pouring before she could reach the porch.

“Thank you, God!” she breathed. “Oh, thank you!”

Then she realized that the threat to High Harbor had suddenly become greater than ever, and that the rain and a delayed meeting would change not a thing.

Some of Lanna’s turmoil must have been communicated to Conan, for he was all at once shaken by a wave of worry that seemed to have nothing to do with his own predicament. In an effort to throw it off he tried to concentrate on the problem of locating his position in the darkness.

A brief glance at the compass under the red beam of the flashlight showed him that the needle was still unsteady. How long had he been drifting? A half hour? All of that, and possibly more. Would he have been carried a mile in that time?

He decided that wind and tide together would have taken him at least halfway to the rock. If, of course, he’d guessed right about the direction of the drift.

Then, with a sudden feeling of shock, he thought of something he knew he should have considered earlier. The tide had been coming in when he left the basin—but what was it doing now?

Teacher had said that the tide would be low at dawn. In that case it ought to be high now, or even beginning to ebb.

Instantly he began scrambling forward, climbing over the disorder of equipment and groping for the coil of line and the piece of broken concrete that, because of the scarcity of metal, had to serve as an anchor. He found the concrete finally, started to heave it over the bow, but thought better of it and began lowering it carefully. It was well that he did so, for he paid out nearly the entire coil before the line went slack, and when he reached the end he found that it had not been made fast to the cleat on the foredeck.

He whistled softly, shaken by the closeness of his escape. Losing the precious line would have been bad enough. But the depth of water was evidence that the tide had turned, and that he was already being carried out to sea.

After checking the towline to the other boat, he wrapped a blanket about him and tried to squirm into a comfortable position in the pile of gear.

He dozed and wakened intermittently. Finally he sat up with a start, suddenly aware that the mist had lifted. The pale-blue lights of the food factories were clearly visible ashore. And off to port, much nearer than he’d imagined, loomed the dark shape of the rock against a paling sky.

In seconds he had the anchor up and the boats headed for the rock.

After circling the huge mass, he closed in cautiously and anchored in two feet of water on the side away from town. It was almost dawn now, and he could easily make out the narrow, ragged beach fifty yards away. There was no sign of

Teacher. But it was still early, and there would be plenty of time to walk here before the tide rose and flooded the beach.

As he waited he looked curiously at the cliff that rose straight above the strip of sand and rubble. It was little more than sixty feet high at this point, and it seemed to dwindle in the direction of Industria, but off to the left it continued to rise until it was lost in the dawn haze.

The Change had made the cliff, for the land had broken away as cleanly as if it had been cut with a knife. He was wondering if the fracture under the city extended this far when an odd grinding sound caught his attention. He glanced up and froze. Directly in front of him a broad section of the cliff was moving. In a kind of horrified wonder, he gaped at the slow-motion spectacle of countless tons of earth and rock, sliding and falling, faster and faster, until they crashed with a thunderous roar into the sea.

He sat gripping the gunwale, trembling, drenched by the outflung spray. Was the fracture breaking already? Then as the dawn brightened he made out several other spots where portions of the cliff had fallen. These were older falls, and they momentarily reassured him. But in the next breath his imagination took over and he became acutely aware of the danger of remaining on this coast.

Why didn't Teacher come?

Dawn turned to gray morning, and from seaward came the murmur of the tide that was now flowing in. Soon the narrow beach under the cliff was covered with water.

It was obvious at last that Teacher wasn't coming. Something had happened.

Sick at heart, Conan jerked back the cover of the tool chest and glanced through Teacher's instructions. Abruptly he threw them aside and snapped the cover in place. It was just as he'd thought. After rigging the sailing craft, he was to set out for High Harbor alone. Teacher had even drawn a rough chart, suggesting the best route to take.

Evidently Teacher, if he couldn't make it here, had little hope of ever reaching the other place. And how could he? A frail old man, nearly blind …

"What have they done with you?" Conan cried, beating his fist on the chest while he tried to think. "Did they lock you up somewhere?" Of course they had. For Teacher was Briac Roa, the most valuable piece of property the New Order could ever hope to own. They'd locked him up and probably set out guards, for by now Tellit would have reported that the two boats were missing, along with the new helper, and they'd know something was afoot.

What should he do? Go on to the other place, unload the boats, and slip back after dark and search for Teacher? The break in the cliff was miles away, and to go there and return would use up battery power he might be in need of later. But to remain here, in a spot so exposed …

The matter was suddenly decided for him. The throb of a distant motor caught his attention, and he jerked about in time to see what appeared to be a trawler just coming into view a half mile to seaward. Hurriedly he pulled up the anchor and moved his two boats around to the other side of the rock. Presently, from the edge of his hiding place, he was relieved to see the trawler moving steadily on up the coast, its ancient motor pounding with the dull beat of a primitive drum.

He had heard they had such a craft, but this was the first time he had seen it. So long as the thing was anywhere in the area, he didn't dare leave the rock in

daylight.

To lessen the risk of being noticed, he moored the boats as close to the rock as possible, and went to the trouble of covering each one with pieces from the roll of gray plastic he had taken from the storehouse. Then he settled down to the long ordeal of watchful waiting, until daylight passed.

When he began his return trip to the basin, he left the second boat with most of the supplies moored by the rock. Overhead shone a moon that, ever since the Change, had been partially obscured by stratospheric mists. The glow of it, and later the lights of the food factories, were enough to help him locate the channel.

Once in the channel he had no trouble, and his only concern was not to approach the basin so closely that his boat could be spotted from shore.

As soon as he could make out the edge of the basin he stopped, eased the anchor over, and stripped off his clothes. From the tool chest he took the small wrecking bar and tied it about his waist with a piece of line. He was about to slip into the water when he thought of the flashlight. What if the night turned dark before he could locate Teacher?

With the flashlight held aloft in one hand, he swam across the basin to the broken edge of the concrete, then cautiously stood up in the half tide while he examined the waterfront. The black silhouettes of the boat shop and the surrounding buildings cut off all light from the food factories, and the area before him could be made out only dimly by the vague glow of the moon. At the moment he seemed to have the waterfront to himself.

He crawled out, and began moving warily along the water's edge, ready to immerse himself instantly if he heard anyone coming. His destination was the administration building. For surely, he reasoned, anyone as important as Teacher would be kept in a convenient place where the officials could meet and talk to him.

As he neared the corner of the projecting building where the waterfront curved, he stopped abruptly. On the other side a light had flashed briefly. Now he heard laughter.

He crept to the corner and peered carefully around it. Fifty feet away he could just make out the shape of the tiny prison where he had spent his first ten days here. In front of it, barely discernible, were two figures with bicycles. Were they the same pair who had brought him his water allowance?

Again a light flashed. There was a cackling laugh, and a woman said jeeringly, "Look at the old fraud! Why, he doesn't know himself who he really is! Ha!"

"Patch," said the other. "Don't you know who you are? Come on, Patchy, what's wrong with you?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with him," came the jeering voice of the first. "He's flipped. I always said he'd flip and burn out his bearings. Now didn't I? Sure I did. If Headquarters had only listened to me in the first place…"

Conan ground his teeth in a sudden fury. Why had Teacher been locked up here? Didn't anyone in Industria have the sense to believe him?

Then, realizing he could easily be discovered where he was, he retreated quickly to the edge of the paving and crawled into the water. Presently he heard the clatter of the plastic bicycles and glimpsed the light moving in the direction of the boat shop. The moment it had vanished he leaped from his hiding place and ran to the cell.

“Teacher, it’s me—Conan,” he whispered. “Are you all right?”

The faintness of the reply frightened him, and he attacked the door in a frenzy, hardly needing the wrecking bar to rip it from its hinges. Inside, he found the old man collapsed in a corner, unable to rise and almost unable to speak.

“Son, don’t—don’t bother with me.… If they catch you … they’ll surely kill …”

Conan snatched up Teacher in both arms, backed out of the place, and began running for the boat basin. He had forgotten the wrecking bar, but the flashlight was still clutched in his left hand.

He was almost at the basin when a light swept over him from the shop.

“Hey, you!” someone called. “What’s going on here?” The voice belonged to Tellit.

Conan froze, then gently set his burden down on the broken paving. He did not have to ask himself the reason for Tellit’s presence here. The little man had undoubtedly taken instant advantage of yesterday’s situation and been put in charge of the shop. And he would be just as eager to profit by what he saw now. It might even bring him citizenship.

Somehow, and very quickly, Tellit had to be dealt with.

The fellow had rushed from the shop, but he stopped abruptly as recognition came. “It’s *you!*” he gasped. “And you come back for *him*, did you? Well, I’ll be —”

“Tellit, listen to me! If you want to save your neck, you’d better come with us —”

“Don’t hand me any of your crazy gab! You think I’m a fool? What’d you do with the boats? Where are they?”

Tellit’s probing beam swept out over the basin, and instantly Conan heaved the flashlight he had been carrying. It only dazed the man, but it was enough to prevent the outcry that would have followed. In the next instant Conan was on him. He tore off the man’s tunic, ripped it apart and hurriedly tied him with it, and stuffed a piece of it in his mouth. Then he whirled and caught up Teacher and carried him into the basin.

It may not have taken more than three minutes to swim the basin with Teacher, towing him by the collar of his tunic, but it seemed ten times as long. Momentarily he expected to hear an alarm from shore, followed by the stab of lights and fire from weapons. They had weapons here, he knew, and surely the night patrols must carry them.

There was no alarm until he had struggled down the channel and fought the tide to the boat. He was gasping and nearly exhausted now, and it was all he could do to keep Teacher’s head above water while he crawled aboard. He pulled Teacher in after him, then became aware of Tellit’s cries in the distance.

But there was no immediate response to Tellit. By the time the first beam from a searchlight began sweeping the water, he was more than a mile beyond the drowned area and racing for the rock.

8
SAIL

CONAN PAUSED ONLY LONG ENOUGH AT THE ROCK TO make Teacher more comfortable by stripping off his wet clothes and wrapping him in blankets. Then, with the other boat on its line astern, he started up the coast as fast as the battery-powered motor could drive them. Without a light it was impossible to make out the compass needle, but for a while the dim outline of the cliff on his right was all the guide he needed.

As long as he could see the cliff he kept well out in deep water. Presently, however, the cliff began to fade in the mist drifting in from seaward, and he was forced to slow and go ever nearer the beach. At last the cliff faded entirely. Now he could only creep along, guided by the soft rush and slap of wavelets against the rocks.

Though the mist was an enemy, he was almost thankful for it as the slow miles passed. The trawler he had seen this morning had not returned. Unless it had gone out to sea, it must be up here somewhere.

Gradually he lost all sense of time, and in his growing weariness he even forgot the trawler. For several days and nights he had had little rest, and in his concern for Teacher he had hardly bothered with food. Now it became a constant battle against sleep, and he was always waking suddenly to nightmare moments of not knowing what he was doing here or where he was bound.

At one such time he awoke and found the boat fast upon a sandbar. While he was struggling to get it off, he heard Teacher say faintly, "Just a little farther—we're almost there.…"

Then, the next time Teacher spoke, they were there. In the misty blackness he could see nothing, not even Teacher. But gratefully he ran the boat ashore, shut off the motor, and dropped the anchor on the pebbly beach.

He had no memory of crawling back into the boat and going to sleep. It seemed that only seconds had passed when he became aware of Teacher's bony hand on his shoulder.

"Conan, get up! We've got to move!"

He did not immediately catch the urgency in the old man's voice, for another gray morning had come, and in the air was the tantalizing smell of fish being fried, and the soft beat of music. Fresh food, and *music!* It had been weeks since he'd eaten fresh food, and years since he'd heard such magic. A magic long vanished, played on instruments that probably no longer existed …

It was a wonderful moment, and a terrible one. For all at once he realized that the music must be from a record being played aboard the trawler. The vessel couldn't be more than a few hundred yards away. As soon as the mist lifted, which could happen any minute, they would be in plain sight of everyone aboard.

Conan sprang to the beach and furiously began unloading the boats. Teacher got out and feebly tried to help. The old man had been badly beaten. His good eye was closed, his face was bruised and swollen, and every painful movement spoke of the blows his body had suffered. Conan raged silently at the stupidity and brutality of those whom Teacher had tried to help. And it had all been for nothing.

"No," said Teacher, reading his mind. "It was not for nothing—but there isn't time to explain now. We—"

"Let me carry the stuff! You're not able—"

"I must work—it will help me to recover. Take everything in yonder—to the right."

Even this close to it, the break in the cliff was hardly noticeable. At first glance it looked like countless other places where rocks had fallen and the sea had eroded the beginnings of a cavern. But it curved deceivingly and extended far back from the tiny beach. Had the tide been high they could have floated the two craft directly into the place and avoided the ordeal they were forced to undergo now.

The boats were tubby fourteen-footers of unusually heavy construction. It took all Conan's strength to drag them, empty, up over the rubble and into the break. As he caught up the last of their gear and hurriedly carried it to safety, he glimpsed the vague shape of the trawler through the rising mist. It had been a very near thing.

A few minutes later he heard the throb of the trawler's motor. He was vastly relieved when he peered out and saw it heading down the coast.

The spring Teacher had spoken about still bubbled in the break, and sent a tiny stream flowing to the beach. The sight of it was reassuring, for there had not been time to fill more than a few of the water bottles the night they left. But when they sat down to eat a hasty breakfast before going to work, all Conan's feeling of relief suddenly evaporated. Teacher was entirely too quiet for his peace of mind.

The old man, still wrapped in his blanket, winced as he tried to make his bruised body more comfortable. "We have a fact or two to face," he began, his voice deceptively mild. "For one thing, geology may give us a bit of trouble later. Do you happen to know what a tsunami is?"

"A—a wave of some kind, isn't it?"

"Yes. Various shocks can cause them. Later, we must be on the watch—" Teacher gave the faintest indication of a shrug. "But that isn't our immediate worry. As soon as the work commissioner and his friends come to their senses, we'll have a swarm of searchers out after us."

"I don't understand. If they beat you—"

"The beating proves a point. I expected punishment."

"You—you *expected* it?"

"Of course. Isn't violence the natural reaction of nonreason to reason, of power to truth?" Teacher chuckled weakly. "Oh, my battered bones! Can't you see how furious I made them? There, right under their noses all the time, was the old rascal they'd spent so much effort trying to find. It was too much for them."

"But I didn't think they believed you!"

"Oh, they believed me. But how could they admit it? Briac Roa old Patch?

Utterly ridiculous! Yet if they'd actually thought I was Patch, the crank at the boat shop whose mind had suddenly slipped, they would have laughed and thrown me out. Into the desert, probably. They can't be bothered with incompetents. But they didn't laugh. So my mission was successful."

Conan could only stare at him in astonishment.

"And now," Teacher added, "they are waking up to the fact that their prize bird has been snatched from the coop. When they don't find us immediately—and I'm sure they think they will—this whole coast will be seething. So we don't have the time I'd counted on to get our craft ready. I'd hoped to have at least a week."

"How long have we got?"

"We ought to be out of here tonight."

"But—but that's impossible," Conan said faintly, thinking of the endless details that had to be done just right—the hull-joining, the sailmaking, the careful assembly of spars that had to be spliced from plastic pieces because there wasn't any wood …

"True," the old man murmured. "So it will have to be tomorrow night instead. Even that seems impossible. But we must manage it somehow, whether we are ready or not. Now that they know who I am, another day will be too late. And I should warn you—if they fail to find us on the coast, they'll carry the search to sea."

"They'll never find us with that old trawler. All we need is a few hours' start —"

"I'm not concerned about the trawler. They have helicopters."

"No!"

"Yes. Two of them. Monstrous old relics they used for heavy lifting. They're more dangerous to us than a dozen boats." Teacher shrugged. "But we'll worry about them later. Let's fasten those hulls together."

As he hurried to work, Conan wondered grimly just what their chances were. He tried not to think of Lanna.

There had been no more deaths at High Harbor, and the danger of infection was now past. But Lanna was very much aware of the other danger. Every time she glanced down at the harbor and saw the trade ship, she was reminded of it. So far as she could learn, the secret meeting had been delayed indefinitely. But of course it was too soon after the sickness scare to start anything, and there were too many tales going around about what had happened. But that wretch of a commissioner was in no hurry. He had already got part of what he was after, and as soon as things quieted down …

Lanna's hand trembled as she whipped the shuttle of her loom back and forth. She had gotten up early to weave a few extra inches of material—getting it from the trade ship was now out of the question, and she would have scorned it had it been offered—but it was impossible to keep her mind on her work. Thoughts of Teacher and Conan kept intruding. How long had it been since Mazal had heard from Teacher? Four days? Five? With so many uncertainties it was hard to keep track of time, and it seemed like weeks.

There was a small sound behind her, and she glanced quickly around and saw Mazal standing in the doorway. In the last few days Mazal's gaunt face had

thinned, and this morning there were dark circles around her eyes.

Lanna said, “I’ll fix breakfast. Why don’t you go back and get some sleep?”

“Who can sleep?” her aunt muttered.

Lanna shook her head and tried to concentrate on keeping the shuttle going. Between them they were aware of two facts, and two facts only. One was that Conan and Teacher were alive, and the other was that some dreadful but unimaginable circumstance had placed them in peril. But at least they were alive. Being aware of it was like knowing that your own heart was still beating.

Mazal came in and sank into a chair near the loom. “The last message I got from Teacher—” she began, then stopped, her eyes on the door.

Lanna glanced around again. Shann was there. He entered slowly, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his robe. For a man who had been through so much lately, he seemed strangely wide awake.

“Has Teacher escaped yet?” he asked.

Mazal gasped, and Lanna dropped her shuttle.

“Well?” said Shann, looking from one to the other.

“Whoever said he was a prisoner?” Mazal asked weakly.

“It all adds up,” Shann told her quietly. “I’ve been suspecting for some time that he was a prisoner—and of course I can see why it was better that I wasn’t told, that no one knew. Now I think I should have the truth. Am I right about him?”

“Yes,” Mazal whispered.

“And Conan’s with him,” Lanna found herself saying.

“*What?*” Shann had never looked so astonished.

Mazal said, “Tell him about it, Lanna.”

When she had explained the whole thing, he sat down, shaking his head. “Lord in heaven,” he breathed. “What a situation!” Then suddenly he swung to Mazal. “And you’ve no idea whether Teacher and Conan have managed to get away?”

“That’s just the trouble,” Mazal wailed. “I can’t find out. Not a thing! If we only knew!”

“Do you think the New Order may have discovered who Teacher is?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Mazal told him.

Shann frowned. “If they know it, maybe we ought to call an emergency meeting and tell everybody here. If all the young people are given the truth about Dyce and the New Order—”

“But not till we hear from Teacher,” Lanna interrupted.

“No, of course not,” he agreed. “It would never do to give his secret away, unless it’s already out. Dyce would get word back, and there’d be the biggest search on—” He shook his head again. “Honestly, I don’t know what to do. It’s a terrible situation.”

They joined the two hulls that first morning, and started in immediately on the sail. It was a big triangle they had planned to make from the bolt of cloth taken on their raid; but now, pressed for time, they used the roll of gray plastic instead. It was seamed quickly over its bolt rope by the same cement used on the hulls, and even permanently fastened to its spar by a quick lacing and a few dabs of cement.

“It will blow out in the first squall,” Teacher muttered. “But at least it will get

us away from here—and save us three days."

Their only flashlight had been used to stop Tellit, but Teacher lighted the burner of a makeshift food warmer, and they managed by its feeble glow to work late into the night.

They were toiling again at the first pale light of dawn, reinforcing the stubby mast and making rigging from the great coil of line that had been part of the stores at the boathouse.

Late that second morning a helicopter approached and, dropping low, hovered for long and terrifying minutes directly over the break.

Conan heard it coming in time to tug their craft into a corner, jerk the gray sail over it, and heave enough sand and gravel upon the plastic to form an effective camouflage. Their supplies, at Teacher's insistence, had already been carefully piled to one side and covered. Even so, it was an unnerving interval before the machine moved on up the coast.

When dark came again, bringing the creeping tide, there were a hundred small tasks undone. But the craft was roughly rigged, and its sail, however crude, seemed usable. Other things could wait.

By the light of the burner they began swiftly stowing all they had brought with them aboard—the food supplies, the water bottles, the tool chest, the plastic bags with their blankets and spare clothing, the cloth, and the roll of line and the gear from the boat shop. Finally, for emergency repairs, they loaded the leftover cement and every scrap of plastic.

When the vessel was afloat, Conan fastened the motor in its well and lashed the batteries near it so they would not come adrift in the seas ahead. He gave a last look around, then placed the burner on the floor near the compass so he could watch the needle if the night turned too dark to get his bearings.

Teacher said, "Are we ready?"

"I—I think so, sir." A strange feeling was coming over him that would have been beyond his ability to describe.

"Then we'd better pray," said Teacher. "Far more depends on this voyage than the safety of two people."

There was a silence, then the old man said quietly, almost as if his Listener was standing beside him, "Please help us and guide us, for you know better than we what we face, and what it could mean if we fail."

For the first time Conan began to sense the frightening responsibility that Teacher carried on his none-too-sturdy shoulders. At that moment, like an icy shock, he was struck with the awful fact of his own responsibility. Without Teacher's knowledge and his hand to guide the future, what would happen to the survivors of the Change?

As he began tugging at their craft, straining and thrusting to float it out through the darkness of the break, he had a sudden vision of the long savage night of man's past. Without Teacher, and all the things Teacher knew and believed in, wouldn't man sink back into that primitive night? Or could he even manage to exist?

This last thought brought another shock, for already he'd learned enough to know that, with things as they were, it wouldn't take much to put an end to man forever. It numbed him for a second, and their craft chose that instant to become wedged in the break. Instead of two fourteen-footers, it was now a rigid twenty-

eight feet, not counting the flimsy rudder at the stern, and it would not curve around projections.

For several horrible minutes he struggled in the waist-deep tide, fighting to free it. When it slid out suddenly into the sea, the incident had indelibly impressed upon him the importance of the role he had been chosen to take. He wanted to cry out against it, but there wasn't time. The breeze was thrusting the bow around, and he was forced to leap aboard and start the motor.

A few minutes later Teacher lowered the false keel in its slot and raised the sail. The great triangle of plastic slatted and rattled alarmingly until he came aft and flattened the sheet. Then it snapped taut, and abruptly the vessel heeled, the bow lifted, and they surged forward under the wind's thrust.

It was the first time Conan had ever been in a sailing craft. But the quick thrill that went through him was almost instantly forgotten as he glanced back at the cliff. Against the night sky it was only a vague shape of darker dark, but somehow it was as threatening as a crouching beast.

He shook his head and told himself he was being foolish. The cliff was no threat, now that they were leaving it. Their worry was the helicopters that would begin searching again in the morning.

"We must not be where they search," said Teacher, reading his mind. "Take the helm, son. Hold her just as she is, with the wind on your left ear. I'll relieve you when you get tired."

"Is High Harbor in this direction?" he asked, as he slid over and grasped the tiller.

"No, it's on the other tack. But we're not trying it tonight. The wind's nor'west, and it's taking us away from the search area."

"What about the motor?"

"Keep it going. Full speed. It won't drive us much faster, but every extra mile counts. We've got to be as far from this part of the coast as possible by dawn."

9
CHASE

IT MAY HAVE BEEN AN HOUR AFTER DAYBREAK WHEN Conan first became aware of the faint sound he had not wanted to hear. It was only a faraway bee drone, but it destroyed any hope that distance might have brought a measure of security. Land was well over the horizon behind them now, and the wind, which had driven them steadily for hours, seemed to be freshening. Under the lift of the great lateen sail the craft was almost planing.

He had not had the heart to awaken Teacher. The old man, swaddled in blankets, was still curled up asleep on the starboard side of the motor. One glance at that drawn and badly bruised face and he decided not to disturb him unless the bee drone came much closer.

He prayed for the sound to go away. For several intervals it did, but always it returned, louder, and he realized the helicopter must be flying a zigzag course, trying to cover a wide section of the sea. In the constant haze it remained invisible for a long time. Then suddenly he made it out, a moving dot that he might have taken for a bird but for the sound it made.

He turned to call Teacher, and found the old man sitting up, listening intently.

Suddenly Teacher ordered, "Heave to, then cut off the motor. We've got to take in the sail and spread it over us."

They hastily lowered the long spar, and managed to spread the gray plastic over most of the vessel. Almost before they could lash it down securely, the helicopter was swinging past, only a few hundred yards off the port quarter.

Conan could hardly believe his eyes when the machine continued on its way, paying not the slightest attention to them. "What's wrong with them?" he asked, shaken. "Couldn't they *see* us?"

"No," said Teacher. "Thanks to the gray plastic. It's almost the same color as the water. And I think they're looking for two boats—one towing the other. It hasn't occurred to them that we may have turned into something different."

"But what are we going to do? They are ahead of us now, and if we use the sail, they may spot us later."

"Use the motor. If we keep going, we ought to run into some fog later. Then we can make sail."

Conan searched the hazy distance. "I think there's a line of fog way off to the left—to port, I mean."

"Head for it. This is where your vision counts. I'm unable to make out anything—or sense it, I should say—more than a hundred feet beyond me."

Conan switched on the motor and started at full speed for the distant fogbank. They were quartering into the wind now, and without the sail they seemed to be barely creeping along. Momentarily he expected to hear the helicopter returning, but the morning was half gone before he heard the sound of it again, and by this

time they were safely hidden by the fog.

Wearily he helped raise the sail and turned the tiller over to Teacher. He fell asleep the moment he stretched out by the motor. It was the first rest he had had in more than twenty-four hours.

When he awoke it was black dark, so dark that he could not even make out Teacher at the helm a few feet away. The motor was still going, and the craft was sliding easily along on the same tack she had been on earlier.

He felt his way aft and took the tiller from Teacher, saying accusingly, "Why did you let me sleep so long?"

The old man chuckled. "For the same reason you let me sleep so long last night. But I was about to call you. I must try to get in touch with Mazal."

"Oh. I guess it's been impossible lately."

"Yes, and she's frantic. I can always pick up her messages, even bits she doesn't want me to know. But she still has trouble getting mine. The last she got was that we were planning to escape—but she doesn't know what's happened. Tonight I've got to get through to her and warn her."

"Warn her? About what?"

"They're having trouble at High Harbor. Our getting away is going to make it worse—it may bring it all to a head. But I'll explain it later."

Teacher moved forward into the blackness. Conan, suddenly disturbed, clung grimly to the tiller and tried to find reason in what he'd just been told. But it made no sense. Finally, aware of hunger, he fumbled in the food locker under the triangular afterdeck, took sandwiches from an opened package, and ate them without enjoyment. He was thinking a little wistfully of raw fish and kelp when Teacher returned.

"Thank heaven," the old man murmured. "I managed to get through to her this time."

"What's going on there? Why, just because we escaped—"

"Conan, do you remember a boy named Orlo?"

"Yes, sir. He was the one I had a fight with the night everybody was waiting to be flown to High Harbor. There wasn't much point to it, except that he wanted to run things. Anyhow, he had the reach on me, and I couldn't handle him."

"Well, it seems he still has the reach on everyone, and still wants to run things. He'd like to take over High Harbor. And he may—with the help of the New Order."

"That doesn't sound good. But how—?"

"I'm just looking ahead, Conan. First, let me tell you something. We've already been spotted."

"No!"

"It happened this morning, soon after you went to sleep. That helicopter came back."

"I heard it coming. But with all the fog I thought we were safe!"

"So did I. But we ran into a rift just as the fellow came by. We were out of it and back into the fog in seconds, but it was all the time he needed to circle and take a good look at us. So now they know what we're like and where we're headed."

"But aren't we headed straight for High Harbor?"

"No. Not in the shape we're in now. There's a dangerous sea to cross, and there

are no charts to help us. We'd never make it. We need a better sail, a stronger hull, a more efficient rudder, a proper centerboard …"

They needed, Conan learned, a dozen improvements to make their flimsy craft more seaworthy. He'd thought of it as strong, but now he discovered that without extra bracings the hull could easily break apart, and that even their slotted keel was a danger. It was thrust straight down, rigid in its slot, and if it struck anything submerged it could tear the bottom out of the boat.

"So we must find an island," said Teacher. "Fast. And fix our vessel and get under way again before they discover us. For they'll come searching. My guess is that they'll call the survey ship back right away."

"What about their other boat? Not the trawler—"

"You mean the trade ship—the one Dyce has at High Harbor? They'll leave it there, of course. Can't you see?"

Conan scowled into the night. "As a sort of ace in the hole, you mean?"

"Exactly. That's why I'm so concerned. If we get away, if we escape them entirely and reach High Harbor, their one chance of getting me will be through Dyce. But Dyce must first gain control of the place. He can't do it alone. He has only a few men, and he doesn't dare start anything new."

"New? You mean he's been pulling some tricks?"

"Yes, but that was before he could have learned anything about our escape. I'm sure he's been told by now. So his next move is to get Orlo's help, and try to organize all those discontented young people who are growing up half wild. Now do you understand?"

Conan whistled. "What a mess! How long will it take us to sail to High Harbor?"

The old man sighed. "There's no answer to that question, son. If we were entirely seaworthy at this moment, and had a fair wind all the way, it would take us three weeks. But the wind is never fair all the time, and we're not seaworthy. So pray that we sight an island in the morning.…"

All through the next day Conan watched hopefully for a smudge of darker gray in the constant haze ahead that would indicate land. Land was out here somewhere, dozens of little spots of it. He had lived on one tiny spot for a while, and Teacher had lived on another, and after his capture he had glimpsed more in the distance from the deck of the patrol vessel. Those bits of land, so far as he had been able to learn, were scattered for hundreds of miles around the sea's upper perimeter.

Why couldn't they find one now?

But twilight came before they had sighted anything, even a wandering seabird. Soon afterward the battery, which had driven the motor so much longer than Conan would have dreamed, died abruptly. He heaved it over the side and connected one of the two remaining batteries.

"Better save the power," Teacher advised. "We may need it later. We should be somewhere close to the island chain now, if not beyond it."

To remain within sight of the chain, they changed course to a more westerly direction and sailed close-hauled through the night. With the first light of morning Conan began looking hopefully again for a gray smudge in the haze.

This was their third day at sea. With the ever-thickening haze, the darkening water, and the occasional long, drifting fingers of mist, Conan was aware of the

changing latitude. It was beginning to have a familiar feel. And familiar, too, was that gradually deepening tone spreading through the northwest sky. He had seen it many times in the past five years, and it always brought bad weather.

All through the morning he managed to hold back his uneasiness with the belief that islands were near and that they would surely sight one soon. But that endless day wore on to another evening, and still they had sighted nothing. By now the wind had died to a whisper. They were losing headway, and their craft was beginning to pitch uncomfortably in a rising swell.

Then Conan saw Teacher raise his white head and sit up stiffly in an attitude of listening.

"What is it?" he asked. But before Teacher could answer, he saw the distant smudge far off their starboard bow. For an instant, hope rose with the thought that he had sighted an island. With a shock he realized the smudge had movement.

"It's the survey ship," said the old man, whose hearing Conan had long ago accepted as phenomenal. "I know the sound of her." He started the motor, and added quickly, "We'll have to come about and run for it. It's our only chance."

On the new tack, motor-driven, they raced down the long sea slopes with hardly enough wind to belly the sail. Conan glanced back at the survey ship. There was a moment when he saw it with frightening clearness against the lowering sky behind it, and there was no question but that it had sighted them. Already it was changing course and swinging toward them. Then he lost it in the swift dark of obliterating storm that was spreading across the world.

Suddenly he heard the wind. He and Teacher leaped for the sail at the same time, trying frantically to lower it and gather it in before it was torn away from them. They managed it, barely, and lashed it down and secured the yard while the vessel yawed and plunged madly.

The wind's voice became a scream. A breaking sea smashed against them, and water poured over the coaming. A violent gust seemed to lift them. Before it hurled them down, Conan heard a sharp sound he could not identify. But when he grabbed for the support of the yard, which had been secured to the afterdeck, he could not find it. Either wind or sea had torn it away, and taken the sail with it.

Faintly above the wind he heard Teacher shout hoarsely, "Conan, we can't stay afloat in this! Get one of the bags—lash it to you!"

In his torment over the failure of all their hopes, he did not immediately understand what Teacher was saying. But as he vainly fought to keep the vessel headed downwind, it came to him that Teacher meant the plastic bags in which they'd stowed their blankets and clothing.

He began groping for one. Astern, a searchlight swept the blackness, passed over them, and returned to pin them for a moment in its glare. The ship was so close that it seemed to Conan it was bound to run them down. But it slid past in the darkness like a phantom, and he did not see the searchlight again.

His free hand touched one of the bags. He tried to grip it while he fought the tiller with his other hand. He had it, then suddenly he didn't, for at that instant they struck. They struck something with such force that he could feel the vessel break apart where it had been joined, and he was catapulted out of the stern sheets and into the welter of flying spume and crashing seas.

He tried to cry out to Teacher, but water closed over him. It tugged him down and pounded him against the bottom, and for an eternity he became only a battered plaything of the surf.

10
ISLET

THE RECEDING TIDE LEFT CONAN STRANDED ON A PEBBLY bit of sand studded with boulders. He could make them out dimly in the first vague light, but for a little while he could not associate them with anything. They were just forms without meaning, yet somehow they seemed to have a kinship to the roaring in his head, and to the distant roaring of the storm that had nearly spent itself.

Then, as the light sharpened, he saw a torn food package partially buried in the sand. Beyond it was a plastic bottle like those he had used for carrying water. Slowly recognition came. Memory followed, swift and terrible.

He staggered to his feet with a hoarse cry.

"Teacher!" he called. "*Teacher!*"

There was no answer. He took a few ragged steps forward and stopped, for there was nowhere to go. Before him was a great jagged pinnacle of rock. At its base were other rocks, and all around it the sea. The dark sea, with its wind-torn strands of mist and the eternal haze that hid all horizons.

"*Teacher!*" he screamed.

Still there was no answer. He sobbed and ran wildly around the great rock. Back in seconds where he had started, he began beating his clenched hands upon the cold granite.

"Why have you done this to us?" he cried, as if the voice that had saved him once had finally tricked him and played him false. "Why? Why? What's the reason for it?"

His cry was an anguished outpouring that came from the complete hopelessness he felt, for it seemed now that everything was lost. Not only Teacher, but all the world that might have been because of Teacher, including Lanna.

The last thing he expected at that moment was for the voice to reply. But suddenly it spoke, quietly and clearly.

"Conan," said the voice. "There is reason and meaning in everything. Look around you."

It shocked him into a kind of wakefulness he had never quite attained before. He forgot the painful battering the sea had given him. Trembling, he jerked about, searching.

He saw it almost immediately—first, the spot of red, and in front of it at the edge of the tide the rock that wasn't a rock though it looked like one. There were countless rocks scattered all through the sea and up to the pinnacle on every side, and this was just another. Except that it was really a plastic bag. And the spot of red that had caught his eye was the cross on Teacher's forehead.

In seconds he had carried Teacher up to the base of the pinnacle, stripped off his sodden clothing, and wrapped him in a blanket from the bag. All the water

seemed to have drained from the old man's lungs, and miraculously he was still breathing. But his breath was faint and his limp hands were icy.

Then Conan stiffened at the sight of the tidal mark on the rock. Already the tide was creeping in, and when it was full this tiny bit of land would be covered with more than six feet of water. Only the jagged arms of the reaching pinnacle would be above it.

It was a chilling discovery. But for the fact that he had heard the voice again, he would have been overcome with the absolute hopelessness of their position. But he thought, There must be something I can do. There *must* be.…

He looked at the bag and at Teacher, and it occurred to him that if the bag was emptied it would almost hold Teacher's long body. Surely it was large enough to fasten under his armpits. It would keep him dry and warm, if some way could be found to hold his head and shoulders above the water.

Conan did not even allow himself to reflect upon how many flood tides they would be able to endure in this attempt to survive. There was only the knowledge that the attempt had to be made. It was followed by the realization that, in order to stay alive, they would need everything he could find that had been washed here from the boat. This last thought sent him rushing about, snatching up a dozen small items and tossing them over near Teacher before the rising tide could sweep them away.

There were several bottles of precious water, a few packages of food, a now useless can of cement, and the remainder of the coil of line that had been used to rig their boat. The discovery of the line solved a problem that had been worrying him.

He was splashing back with it, thinking how he could loop it around the rock to hold Teacher above the high-tide mark, when the seabirds found him. Three gulls, winging toward the pinnacle, swooped low and suddenly began circling him, screaming excitedly.

He dropped the line and held out his hands to them in incredulous wonder. It couldn't be, but it was.

"Mara … Jeddi … Rilla," he whispered, recognizing each and calling it by name. "What are you doing here? How did you ever—?"

He stared up at the pinnacle. Could this be one of the tiny islets that had flanked his home? Turning, he strained to see through the haze. Presently he found what he sought—not where he had imagined it would be, but almost in the opposite direction. He could hardly make it out, and it took him long seconds to get his directions straight and assure himself of the truth.

He was standing on the western islet where, two years ago, he had come on a long and dangerous swim in a search for wood. Only, the place had looked entirely different then. He had approached it from the other side, and there had been high ground where he was standing now. But the storms of two years had battered it all away, leaving the rocks.

His first quick surge of relief and delight at his discovery was instantly tempered when he glanced over at Teacher. How could he possibly get Teacher across that threatening sweep of water to the safety of the main islet? Towing him, even buoyed by some of the empty water containers, was out of the question. The distance was too great, the currents too strong.

Then it came to him in a rush how the thing could be managed. The answer

lay over on the main islet.

He was suddenly relieved to see that Teacher's good eye was open, watching him curiously. "Conan," the old man whispered, "Conan, what are you up to?"

Conan caught up the coil of line he had dropped and hastened toward him. "I'm planning how to get us to High Harbor," he announced.

It took only a few minutes to lash together the objects he had salvaged and secure them against the tide. More time was required to pile a six-foot pyramid of rocks against the base of the pinnacle and fasten Teacher above it to one of the jagged arms. When he scrambled down, the tide was already up to his knees.

"You've got to hang on till I get back," he said to Teacher. "If the wind's against me, I won't be able to make it until tomorrow. Just hang on."

In spite of his weakness and the hazardous hours ahead, the old man managed to chuckle. "Oh, I'll be here," he replied. "The way you've got me bagged and tied … Just take it easy, son—don't worry about me."

Conan studied the sea, then began swimming slowly but steadily, quartering into the tidal current to make allowance for his drift. Trailing behind him on a length of line fastened to his waist was a nearly empty water bottle which he could cling to in an emergency. It was insurance he hadn't had on his first trip. He had nearly drowned then, and it had taken him two days to make it to the pinnacle and back. If the wind hadn't turned against him and kicked up a sea, he might have managed it in half the time.

At the moment, everything seemed to be in his favor. Because it was in his favor, he was tempted to swim faster for a while. Then prudently he slowed again, knowing it would be better to save his strength for a last-minute battle if conditions changed. They could change in a flash, and he knew he wasn't fooling Teacher a bit by mentioning that he might not return until tomorrow. The weather could separate them for a good many tomorrows. But at least Teacher had a bottle of water hanging near him, as well as a slightly damp package of the New Order's sandwiches. They had agreed that a little seawater might help the flavor of the things.

Conan was more than halfway to his destination when suddenly, for seemingly no reason, he began thinking of the miles of towering cliffs beyond Industria. Why had they seemed so threatening? Was it because the fracture under the city extended all the way up to the break where they had rigged the boat? All at once, remembering the things Teacher had said, he was sure of it.

What would happen when the fracture gave way and that whole stretch of coast slipped down into the sea?

Teacher had mentioned a tsunami, and had tried to hide his concern about it. A tsunami was a wave, caused by a shock. A deep shock in the earth's crust, making a sort of tidal wave.

Conan missed a stroke, and a dollop of seawater caught him in the face. He had just remembered something he had read years ago, something he almost wished he could forget.

Shock waves were huge. They could be mountainous things, great roaring cliffs of water that traveled at incredible speed. They could cross an ocean in very little time, and bring devastation to places thousands of miles away.

The vision stayed with him, and almost spoiled his feeling of accomplishment

when he finally stumbled ashore, hungry and exhausted, upon the walled and fortresslike islet that had been his home.

More birds met him here, joining those which had followed him across. He was obliged to pause and greet each in turn before he could hasten to the pile of salvage he had gleaned through the years and dig down through the protecting rocks to make sure that certain priceless objects were safe. They were. Reassured, he peered around almost fondly at his domain. It was hard to believe that only a few weeks had passed. It seemed as if he'd been away for years. The storm had done some damage to the outer wall and one of the fish traps, but that was to be expected. An hour's work would repair it.

Suddenly aware of his hunger, and at the same moment remembering what had happened here the day he was taken away, he crawled hastily into the storage hut and began clawing at a pile of dried seaweed and wood chips in one corner. Then he went limp with relief. Dr. Manski and the ship's captain, who had so enjoyed his smoked fish, had overlooked the main pile of it. He wolfed down several pieces, and stretched out gratefully upon the seaweed to rest.

It was perhaps two hours later when he crawled out, feeling much better, and searched for the sun behind the constant overcast. When he found it he was astonished to discover that it was only a little way beyond its noon position. Could he have made the swim from the pinnacle in only half a morning? Unquestionably he had.

Most of the afternoon lay before him. If conditions were right, there was all the time he needed to bring Teacher here before dark.

Conan spent several minutes in a careful study of the weather and the sea, then hurriedly unearthed the old and battered surfboard that had been his greatest treasure, and the last one he had found. In seconds he had it in the water and was standing upon it, using a crude paddle fashioned from a board to send him swiftly in the direction of the pinnacle.

He returned late that afternoon, with Teacher trussed like a mummy in the bag and securely lashed to the board.

Ashore, the old man, though still extremely weak, lay back against one of the many protective walls and peered about with a sort of bemused wonder. "So," he murmured. "This is how you developed that set of sculptured muscles! To have shifted so many tons of rock, you must have been busy nearly every daylight hour from the time you arrived here."

"Just about, sir."

Teacher adjusted his piratical patch, which miraculously had survived all the recent violence to which he had been subjected. He squinted at the curved log in the lee of a wall, and said, "That, I presume, will form the main body of the craft you have in mind to take us to High Harbor."

"Y-yes, sir." Try to hide anything from Teacher!

"And the surfboard, on edge, will be used for the outrigger."

"That's what I thought, sir."

"And that cloth we still have—how fortunate we didn't use it for the other sail! But we must have needles to sew it with. Needles can be made of this and that, but there are good ones in the tool chest, if it can be found. Needles alone can save us time, and there are chisels and other tools in the chest that can save us weeks in shaping the log. Right now time is rather important on several counts.

Every hour we can save—”

“Yes, sir.”

Not a word about the tsunami. But there was no need to mention it. Teacher knew that he understood about it now. It hung over them, a threat that would increase with every passing day. It was just one threat of many, for there was the survey ship that was still searching for them somewhere, and the helicopters that were surely able to fly this far from base. And, if they escaped all those, there were the great mists to worry about if they got away from here too late. How could they navigate the mists when their only compass was lost? Every hour saved …

Conan said, “I’m going back to the rock at dawn. The tide will be low then, and I can look around in the deeper water where we hit. That chest is bound to be around there somewhere.”

Dawn was only a vague promise behind him when he started out in the morning, but it was all the guide he needed to paddle to the rock again. The tool chest eluded him, though he returned with food packets and water bottles lashed to the board, along with the can of cement and an assortment of plastic scraps which they had intended to use as strengthening for the lost vessel.

“Never mind,” said Teacher, who had spent the morning chipping away at the log with one of Conan’s old stone tools. “The chest is there, and you’ll find it at the next low tide. I’m sure of it.”

Teacher was right. He found the tool chest intact with all its contents the next morning. And on the way back to the islet with it he found something else. The circling birds called his attention to it first, and he had to paddle hard a quarter of a mile out of his way to overtake it before wind and current would carry it out of sight.

It was a life raft containing the limp figure of a man sprawled facedown on the bottom.

Conan did not waste time in an attempt to give aid to the man. Swiftly he attached a towline to the raft and began paddling furiously for the islet, which already was fading in the distance. Tool chest and bobbing raft slowed his pace to a crawl. It became a long, exhausting battle against the wind before he reached the narrow beach where Teacher stood anxiously waiting.

“I knew something was wrong, but I couldn’t see far enough—” Teacher began, then exclaimed, “Good heavens, what have we here?”

Wearily Conan hauled the raft up on the beach, then stooped to lift the occupant. He’d thought it was a man, but now he saw it was a woman. Suddenly he gasped in astonishment. “Why, it’s Dr. Manski!”

“So it is,” Teacher murmured. “And this means the survey vessel must have gone down in the same storm that wrecked us. Ah me, the curious ways of fate. … Conan, take her into the little hut, and I’ll bring a bottle of water and a blanket. She’s suffering from exposure and thirst.”

Dr. Manski was conscious enough to drink greedily from the bottle Conan held for her. But it was some time before she recognized him, and the day was almost gone before she found the strength to crawl from the hut.

With one hand clutching the blanket about her, she peered curiously around and slowly approached the log where Conan was working. “What a crazy thing this is!” she began, her harsh voice little more than a croak. “Who would have

thought, when I rescued you a few weeks ago, that I would find myself back here —"

Dr. Manski stopped, and Conan saw that she was staring at Teacher, whose presence she evidently had not been aware of before. "You!" she cried. "You! You scheming old rascal! What kind of mad tale did you tell the commissioners to make them send my ship after you?" She was trembling now, her voice rising with fury. "The ship's lost now—and you're to blame for it! And every man aboard was lost, all because of some mad tale—"

"Hey," said Conan. "Just a moment. Who do you think he is?"

"*I* know who he is!" Dr. Manski cried. "He's that old devil, Patch, and why he wasn't disqualified years ago—"

"He's *not* Patch," Conan told her. "I mean, his real name is Briac Roa."

"Briac Roa!" She laughed harshly. "Is that what he told you? And you're fool enough to believe it?"

"But you don't understand—" Conan began, and stopped when he saw Teacher shake his head.

"Dr. Manski," Teacher said, "if you want to call me Patch, by all means do so. But I suggest that you go back and get some rest. You've had a very bad experience, and you're still feeling the effects of shock and exposure."

She glared at him a moment, turned angrily away, took several faltering steps, and suddenly began to crumple.

Conan caught her before she fell and carried her to the hut.

When he returned to the log and picked up the hatchet he had been using, he said bitterly, "Of all things to happen! Why did it have to be her we're stuck with?"

"I can think of far worse," Teacher said mildly. "Besides, she may be of help to us."

"Help, my foot! I don't want anything to do with her. I hate her."

"You don't really. You just hate the ideas she reflects."

"Maybe so, but it makes me hate her. I hate everything about the New Order. Don't you?"

"No, I don't feel that way."

Conan dropped his hatchet. "But—but you were their prisoner for four years!" he exclaimed. "You *must* hate them!"

"Son, I can't hate them. I have only admiration for most of them."

"But how can you? They branded you and beat you and made slaves of I don't know how many and killed I don't know how many more. They're warped and twisted, and absolutely merciless—"

"Yes, Conan," Teacher interrupted. "All you say is true. But you forget that they were fighting a terrible battle for survival, and had nothing but a few machines to do it with. Industria was paralyzed, and it still is, largely. It took the sternest of measures to stay alive and keep their few machines going. And in such circumstances it's usually the toughest ones, with the least to offer, who grab the power." Teacher paused, then said, "Don't judge the many by the few. There are some fine people in Industria, and they deserve only praise for what they've done. Those are the ones the world can't afford to lose—that's why I had to go back and warn them. As for the others—"

"What about the others?"

Teacher shrugged. “The deadliest drug in the world is power. The commissioners who are running things are going to lose it unless they can expand and get more power. Taking over High Harbor will help. But it will help them more to regain other powers that were lost with the Change. Now do you understand?”

“I—I think I do, sir.”

The old man glanced at the smaller hut. “As for her, let her go on believing I’m old Patch. It will be easier. She’s dedicated to the New Order, because that’s all she has left. You’ll never change how she thinks by appealing to her reason. Let her come to her own conclusions without any aid from us. In the meantime she can be of immense help to us.”

“Help? How?”

“By sewing the sail. By catching and smoking the fish we’ll have to take with us to eat. By doing a hundred things that will save us time. For we’ve got to do the impossible. We must build our new craft, and get away from here, in little more than a week.”

“A week!” Conan swallowed. “But you *know* we can’t.”

“We can. And we must. Or we’ll be caught in the mists and never see High Harbor again. Now get busy. We’ve good tools to work with. You’ll be surprised how fast we can chip out this log and turn it into a sailing canoe.”

11
LOST

THEY WORKED LIKE DEMONS FROM EARLIEST LIGHT TILL dark. In two more days the log was actually hollowed and shaped, and before the next evening the outrigger as well as the sail had taken form. After she had been told how matters stood, Dr. Manski went grimly about her tasks and spoke only when necessary. But Conan, noting the hard glances she gave Teacher, was aware of the many unanswered questions that were troubling her.

Suddenly, on the fourth evening, she demanded harshly, "Patch, what monstrous tale did you tell the commissioners? And don't give me any more of your evasions. I'll have the truth this time."

"I told them," said Teacher, "about the fracture under Industria." He hardly looked at her as he spoke, and went on working without a pause. He was helping Conan splice two of the poles from the salvage pile to make a spar for the sail she was sewing.

"Well?" she said. "What about this fracture?"

"I explained what would happen when it gives way, and urged them to warn everyone and begin moving their food machinery immediately. I can only hope they did. Half the city is on the point of sliding into the sea."

"What utter nonsense! Don't tell me they believed you!"

"They must have believed me. Otherwise they wouldn't have started such a search for us when Conan and I escaped."

A baffled look came into her hard black eyes. "I don't understand this. I don't understand it at all. Why would they believe such an impossible tale? And from you, of all people? There has to be a reason. What is it, Patch?"

Teacher shrugged. "I convinced them I was Briac Roa."

She glared at him. Suddenly she burst out wrathfully, "What kind of fools have we got running the New Order?"

"Blind fools," Teacher said mildly. "They've wasted years searching for a man who wouldn't have done what they wanted if they'd found him. They've been thinking of him as a kind of scientific god they could force to do anything and solve every problem. If they had had any faith in a real God, they would have gone ahead on their own, and they'd be better off today."

"Enough!" Dr. Manski cried. She threw the sail aside and jerked to her feet. "One of you hears voices, and the other spouts rot about God. What stupidity! If you expect me to help you—"

Conan said coldly, "If a voice hadn't directed me, I wouldn't be alive now—and you wouldn't be alive either, Dr. Manski, because I wouldn't have been around to pull you out of the water."

"I've expressed my gratitude," she snapped. "But that doesn't keep you from being cracked."

"Then it's two cracked ones you must endure," said Teacher, smiling. "For I too have long been directed by a voice."

Conan glanced at him in quick surprise, and the old man nodded. "I ignored it the first time it spoke, and as a result I lost my eye. Since then, I've learned to listen."

Dr. Manski sniffed. "And it's this invisible God, I suppose, who talks to you and gives you advice?"

Teacher raised his white eyebrows. "Why should *I* receive special favors? You seem to forget that all things are already known, and that the wisdom is available to all of us."

She sniffed again. "How? Just by listening?"

"Why not? Each of us is given an inner ear to hear it, if we will. If we don't hear it, it's because we've allowed the ear to go deaf."

For a moment she stood looking from one to the other, her gaunt face hardening. Abruptly she burst out, "Of all the rot! I've had enough of it. And rather than put up with any more of it, I'd prefer to remain here when you leave. I'll take my chances on being rescued."

Teacher shrugged. "Suit yourself. But if you stay, I doubt if you'll be rescued in time."

"In time for what?"

"You're a woman of some learning. Haven't you enough elemental geology to realize what will happen here when the earth's crust under Industria suddenly makes an adjustment?"

The doctor's black eyes widened a trifle. "There will be a shock wave?"

"Yes. A tsunami. It will pour over this islet and sweep it bare."

She opened her mouth, then slowly closed it. Suddenly her black eyes darted to the craft they were building. "What will happen to that flimsy thing when the tsunami hits it?"

"Nothing. If the crest isn't breaking, it should ride over the wave like a cork."

Conan looked at him in surprise. He hadn't known this. Teacher added, "The great danger is to High Harbor. The tsunami is bound to strike it. But the place is at an angle to the sea, and I'm praying the wave merely pours across the harbor itself and keeps on going. And of course they'll be warned hours ahead—"

"But how? Who will know?"

"Possibly Dyce, if he still has radio contact. But any communicator will know when the fracture breaks under the city. You cannot help but feel the fear from so many minds."

Dr. Manski stared at him. "Patch," she said slowly. "Patch, you're not a bit like you were at the boat shop. You've changed. You've changed completely. *Who are you?*"

"I think we'd better save any further discussion until we are at sea," he replied. "There simply isn't time for it now. If we value our lives, we must be on our way in four more days."

It had seemed impossible to finish in so short a time. But somehow they did it. By the final evening the log canoe, with its lateen sail and outrigger, was ready and loaded. Strips of cemented plastic now decked the hollowed log to prevent it from swamping. Upon the platform between canoe and outrigger was fastened the doctor's life raft, and all around it, securely lashed, were pieces of equipment

and bottles of water from the cistern Conan had built long ago. Under a hatch in the canoe were stored extra water in the bottles he had saved, and most of the fish that had been smoked with the mounds of chips taken from the log.

It was nearly dark when they finished loading. But no one suggested that they wait till dawn. Sea and weather were in their favor, and a fresh wind was blowing.

Conan said good-by to his birds. He thrust the craft out from the beach and raised the sail. When they were under way, escorted by a dozen wheeling gulls, he glanced back once and saw the islet fading in the dusk. He swallowed, knowing he was seeing it for the last time.

He looked at the veils of mist shrouding the darkness ahead. They filled him with sudden dread. How were they going to sail this unknown sea without even a compass to guide them?

At the time the outrigger craft was beginning its uncertain journey, Lanna was going dejectedly back to the cottage with Tikki riding on her shoulder. Without the comfort of Tikki her dejection would have reached an almost unbearable low. All the news had been bad for weeks. But who would have thought the young people—especially the ones she had counted on to support Shann—would have acted as they did this morning?

Lanna paused, set down the basket of berries she had spent the afternoon picking, and glanced at the bottom of the long slope where the harbor lay. Through the trees she could just make out the trade ship, looking almost like a toy in the distance. At the sudden sight of it she felt such a rush of resentment that she failed to see the activity going on at the new dock not far from it. Why, she thought, can't the ugly thing go away and leave us all alone? What's it brought us but a cargo of trouble?

Her mind went back to the impromptu meeting Shann had called this morning. Now that the New Order knew about Teacher, it seemed the right time to tell the young ones the truth about what had happened. The truth should have finished Commissioner Dyce with everybody. But somehow it hadn't.

Oh, there had been some indignation, of course. And some silly arguments. "I don't get it," one of the boys had said. "Instead of acting as he did, why didn't Teacher just tell the New Order who he was and co-operate with them? Wouldn't everybody have been better off?"

That started it, and they had had it back and forth for a while, some for Teacher, but just as many against. And the shocking fact was that no one was really much concerned about Teacher. After so many years the younger ones had forgotten him, and the older ones were much more taken up with their own affairs. Many of them were even pairing off and taking mates. And although they had a low opinion of the commissioner, they saw no reason why they shouldn't trade with him—especially when it came to things they wanted, like bikes and music boxes and mirrors and scented powder.

For a moment Lanna's thoughts wandered, and she felt a sharp pang of envy as she remembered how some of the boys had been with their girls. If Conan ever returned, would he look at her in that very special way? Or had she grown into such a pale, colorless creature that he'd no longer have any interest in her?

Then she forgot that unsettling possibility as she remembered how the meeting

had broken up. One of the older boys, a group leader, had asked, “When Teacher comes, who’s going to be in charge here?”

“He will, of course,” Shann told him. “If it hadn’t been for Teacher, not one of us would be here now.”

There had been a moment’s silence, a lot of whispering, then one of the girls said, “We respect Teacher and all that, but, really, he must be getting awfully old. And it’s about time we elected our own leaders. Don’t you think we ought to run High Harbor ourselves? How about it, people?”

The young ones had agreed, but there had been some concern about Orlo. “What good will it do to choose our own? You know Orlo’s about ready to take over anyway.”

“What if he does? He’s got an in with the commissioner. He’ll get us the things we need.”

“We don’t want Orlo!” someone cried. “We should get together and choose our own!”

“Why don’t we wait till Teacher gets here?”

“Aw, forget Teacher! He may never make it. Anyhow, there’s going to be a meeting soon. Haven’t you heard?”

What meeting?

The rumor was that it was to be a big meeting. But only a few had heard about it, and no one had any details. Obviously something was going on that was being kept quiet.

Lanna glanced unhappily at the harbor again, and for the first time noticed the activity at the dock. She stared. In the misty distance it was hard to see clearly, but what seemed to be a large group of the older boys and girls were lined up, waiting their turn to be ferried out to the trade ship.

What was happening on board?

Was this the meeting she’d heard about this morning? She decided it couldn’t be. There were not enough young ones. But it must have something to do with it. And with Orlo. Was the commissioner entertaining some of the group leaders, hoping to bribe them to vote for Orlo?

The rising resentment in her turned to anger. Anger not only at Dyce, who was working behind Shann’s back, but at all those who had accepted the invitation to go aboard. She felt certain that some of them were ones Shann had talked to this morning. Didn’t they have any feeling of loyalty, or even pride?

Her eyes darkened and her slender hands clenched. Then she fought down her anger as she realized she ought to find out what was going on. If it had anything to do with the secret meeting, the future of High Harbor might depend upon it.

But how was one to learn anything without going aboard?

All at once she caught her lip between her teeth. There *was* a way, if she could manage it.

“Tikki,” she whispered. “Tikki, I want you to fly down there and circle around the ship. And don’t be afraid if I come with you, and sort of become part of you. Go, Tikki! Fly!”

As the tern rose from her shoulder, Lanna closed her eyes and tried to project herself forward as she had done twice before in her life.

She had been only three the first time, and it had come about so easily that she hardly realized what had happened. There had been the little animal at the edge

of the meadow near the summer cabin where her folks had gone that year, before the war got so bad. It was the first wild furry creature she had ever seen. What it was she still didn't know—a chipmunk, possibly, or a small rabbit. But the sight of it had so delighted her that her heart had instantly gone out to it, and in a blink she had found herself looking at the world through the creature's eyes. She was aware at that moment of the feel of the grass under the tiny paws and the pleasant smell of it in the twitching nostrils. There had been other smells, and many sounds—safe sounds like scurryings among the leaves and various chirpings, and not-so-safe sounds like the sudden tread of heavy feet. There had been fright, followed by momentary panic on the part of both of them. Then she had found herself back, looking at the world through her own eyes.

It had happened the second time a year later, when her interest had been captured by a bird flying high overhead. She had thought how wonderful it must be, floating up there on feathered wings, so far above everything. But the actual experience of finding herself at that height, at four, with nothing whatever under her but the faraway ground, had been so frightening that she'd been careful never to try it again.

But now she *must* do it.

Lanna concentrated. She put all her will into it, but still she remained by the tree where she'd stopped, while Tikki receded in the distance.

Presently there came the realization that the ability must have left her because of her long fear of using it. After the uncertainties of the past weeks, and all that had happened, this failure was almost too much. She put her hands over her face and began to sob.

Had it not been for the daily knot he tied in the line to the sail that Teacher called the sheet, Conan would have lost all track of time. This was the evening of the tenth day since they had left the islet, and they seemed to be moving in a void.

At first it had not been too difficult to hold to a westerly course. Always, through the haze, they had been able to make out the glow of the sun by day and the moon by night. Then came the dark of the moon, and it was much harder. But you could manage, once you got the trick of it, provided the wind and sea didn't change too much between twilight and dawn. Just steer by the feel of the wind on your ear, and pray you didn't run into something you couldn't see.

But for the past three days the mist veils had been getting thicker. There was no horizon, and the vague sun glow had gradually vanished. It had been hours since Conan had had any feeling of direction. The wind, he was sure, must have changed since morning, and for all he knew they could be heading back the way they had come.

He glanced at Teacher, and the old man murmured, "Steady as she goes, son."

"You think we're still headed west?"

"More west than east, surely. But by tomorrow—" Teacher shrugged.

"But all this mist—I don't understand. Have the great fogs come early?"

"Very likely. And there are currents we don't know about. I have a feeling we've been carried northward to the fog area. It's where the old ice cap used to be."

"Oh."

Conan swallowed, feeling suddenly helpless. He thought of the smoked fish, which was more than half gone, and their water, which was getting low.

"What—what do you think we'd better do?" he asked.

"Pray," the old man said softly.

Dr. Manski snorted. She had said little all day, and had avoided argument for a long time. She had taken her regular turns at the tiller and proved herself a good sailor. Not once had she complained or admitted fear, even in the midst of a brief storm that had threatened to tear their craft to pieces.

But now she said harshly, contemptuously, "Pray to what? Those voices you hear?"

Teacher glanced at her and smiled. "Would you pray to a telephone, Doctor?"

"Eh? Telephone? Why do you answer me with such nonsense?"

"It isn't nonsense. A telephone is a connection between two people. The voice that sometimes gives me advice is also a connection. Perhaps it is a guardian spirit, or perhaps it is even my own spirit. Who knows? But it is a connection."

"Humph! Between you and what?"

"Between me and that well of knowledge that some call God."

She snorted again. "Here we go with that God stuff! Only now we've got souls and spirits thrown in. Do you really believe that you have such a thing as a spirit or a soul, old man?"

"Certainly. It's the only important and lasting part of me."

She laughed heartily. Abruptly she pointed a finger at him and said harshly, "Listen to me. I am not just a doctor. I am a surgeon, and a good one. In surgery, I have cut into every part of the body—not once, but countless times. And never have I found anything resembling a soul, or even a spot where one could hide."

Teacher laughed. "And you never will, Doctor."

"Why do you laugh at me?"

"Because you've been searching in one dimension for something that exists in another."

"It doesn't exist at all! I defy you to prove it!"

Teacher spread his hands. "What are you living for, Doctor?"

"I didn't ask to be born," she snapped. "But I'm here, and I've tried to make the best of it. But I know I'm just so much perishable flesh with a brain. Anyway, I'm not important. Only the New Order is important."

"But you *are* important," the old man insisted. "Don't you realize there's purpose in your very existence?"

"Ha! Name it!"

"You are here to help others, and to learn."

She glanced at Conan. "Do you believe all this rot?"

"Yes."

"He's sure sold you a bill of goods. Is that why you call him 'Teacher'?"

"I call him that," Conan said slowly, "because that's the name he's always been known by."

"So! And how long have you known him?"

"All my life."

"All your life!" She stared at him. At last she said, "And he's the man who was known to the world as Briac Roa?"

"Yes."

“I might be willing to believe it,” she muttered, “but for two things. Patch doesn’t even resemble the pictures I’ve seen. And the great Briac Roa was *much* too intelligent to ever believe in any such nonsense as God.”

At the moment, Conan didn’t care what she believed in. It was almost dark. The wind had died, and the sail had gone slack. If he had had any remote sense of direction, it had left him in the past few minutes. The stark truth was something he hated to face.

They were lost. They were drifting in a void, and if they had strayed into the region of the great fog, they could go on drifting like this forever.

Dr. Manski seemed to realize their predicament almost at the same time.

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” she said.

“We are now,” said Teacher.

“I thought so. I’ve been through the edge of this region in the survey ship. We got out of it because we had the only gyrocompass in existence. But there’s no hope of getting out of it now.”

“There’s hope, Doctor. There’s always hope.”

“Bah! Why don’t you face facts? Or are you afraid to die?”

“I am not concerned for myself, Doctor.”

“Nor am I. So let us accept the truth. We will die on this foolish contraption. One by one, we will die.”

“I doubt it. I have a feeling we will live to see High Harbor.”

She laughed coldly. “You believe in miracles, do you?”

“Of course.”

She laughed again. “Then, if a miracle happens, I will eat crow, as they say. I will accept this silly God of yours.”

“You don’t have to. You must never pretend.”

“I won’t have to. We will drift until we die. All three of us.”

12
GUIDE

ONLY ONCE SINCE THE CHANGE HAD LANNA CLIMBED THE curving steps to the tower's upper story. That was when she had taken Tikki up and ordered him to find Conan. Possibly Tikki could have succeeded just as easily without using the tower as a starting point, but she did not think so. The tower was ancient, and it had been a landmark long before the sea crept so close. There was something mystic about it, and it was only natural to use it as a point of departure. And wasn't it the only spot where Mazal could get in touch with Teacher?

It was still early in the evening when she hurried up the crumbling steps with Tikki cradled in one hand. Upon reaching the small open area under the thatched roof, she stopped suddenly, clutching the coping for support while she fought back her terror of that threatening vastness spread before her. Finally she forced herself to go on and stand at the place where Mazal stood every evening.

"Tikki," she whispered, holding the bird above the protecting wall. "Tikki, you must find Conan again—but this time you must guide him home. Understand? Conan is way out yonder somewhere in the mist, and he is lost. Go, Tikki, and find him and show him the way here."

The tern spread its slender, black-tipped wings, rose from her hand, and began circling upward. When it passed from her sight above the thatch, she closed her eyes and prayed, then turned to flee down the steps.

She almost ran into Mazal coming up.

"You—you've sent Tikki?" Mazal asked.

"He's on his way."

"Do you really think he can find them?"

"Of course he can! He found Conan, didn't he?"

Mazal nodded. "But I don't see how. I don't understand how he can possibly —"

"Oh, if I were Tikki—or any bird—I'm sure I could do it. It's all in how you—"

Lanna turned suddenly, almost gasping, "I can't stand it up here. Let me down."

She fled down the steps.

Her aunt followed. In the garden, Mazal said, "Sometimes I think I know you, then I realize I don't. Nothing could have made me go to Orlo's camp and do what you did. Yet you can't even stand the sight of the open sea."

"It's a horror. Don't you *feel* the danger in it?"

"No. I mean, I'm not ignoring Teacher's warning about another one of those waves. But, heavens, he doesn't seem to realize we've had nine of the things since the Change. They *are* dangerous, of course, and I suppose a really big one could do some damage down in the harbor. But I always keep one eye on the horizon when I go fishing, or watch how the tide runs out when it's foggy. It

sucks out suddenly, you know. I've seen two of the things coming and had plenty of time to scramble up to a safe height."

Mazal paused, then went on, "But to come back to Tikki. I'm so worried I'm sick. Do you think the fog is going to make it hard—?"

"Mazal, when you're able to—to sort of *sense* where they are, the fog shouldn't make any difference. Don't you see? As I started to tell you, the right direction is like a light in the dark. The only thing—"

"What is it? What worries you?"

"Oh, nothing. I—I just wish we could have known earlier the trouble they were having. But I'm sure it will be all right now.…"

She wasn't at all sure. In fact, deep down, she had a dreadful feeling that she was sending Tikki too late. The mist veils were already creeping along the coast, a sure indication that the great fogs were not far behind. When the fogs came, they could be so dense at times that even the birds refused to leave their perches.

It might take more than Tikki to guide Teacher and Conan here.

There was no longer any doubt in Conan's mind that the great fogs had come early, and that they'd been caught in the worst part of them. This morning—if you could call this choking grayness morning—he could hardly see Teacher, swaddled in bag and blanket, a few feet away. Dr. Manski was only a disembodied voice at the forward end of the life raft.

It seemed impossible that their craft could actually be in movement. But the sail was drawing and they were moving swiftly, a fact that always surprised him whenever he reached down and tested the water with his fingertips.

But in what direction were they going?

"Wouldn't it be better," he asked Teacher, "to come about once in a while and try another tack?"

"I doubt it. Keep the wind abeam. We'll be less likely to sail in circles."

"Circles!" said Dr. Manski. "Ha! What difference does it make? We'll be moving like ghosts in this haunted place for the rest of eternity."

Teacher gave a little chuckle. "My dear Doctor, I didn't know your philosophy admitted such immaterial things as ghosts."

"Just a figure of speech," she snapped.

"Well, suppose we find our way out of this. Suppose—"

"Ha! Who'll show us the way out? One of your voices?"

"I rather had a bird in mind," Teacher murmured.

"Bird!" she spat.

"Birds have a certain affinity with angels," he said mildly. "But I was wondering, if we reach High Harbor, how you will continue to feel about the New Order."

"I am a servant of the New Order! *Nothing* else matters."

"But suppose the New Order dies?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"But how can it live without followers? In my years in Industria, I saw almost no young people. Practically everyone there is an oldster who lost all his family in the war. Like you, for instance."

She remained silent.

"Without children, the New Order is bound to die. You've been dedicating

yourself to nothing."

"You're wrong!" she cried. "We'll have followers. Commissioner Dyce will take care of that. He has his instructions."

"Were his instructions to spread a virus that endangered every life in High Harbor? For that is what he did. He let one little girl die so he could prove the deadliness of the virus, all so he could make a profitable deal to stop it."

"You old fool, why are you telling me such a lie?"

"It is the truth, Doctor. I am a communicator, and I have been in constant touch with my daughter ever since the Change. Her husband is the doctor I put in charge at High Harbor. One thing I did not want to have fall into the hands of people like Dyce was a new power unit I had developed. It's the simplest of things, and we all need it to save us from the drudgery we face today. But the commissioners of the New Order want it for another reason. And now they've got it—or at least, Dyce has it. It's the price we've had to pay to that fellow before he would lift a finger to save anyone."

There was a strangled sound from Dr. Manski. Teacher said, "Is that the way to gain followers for the New Order, Doctor? And when you rebuild the world, do you want to pattern it after the monstrosity we destroyed? Or do you think a simpler approach, with neighbor helping neighbor, would be a little better?"

Conan could hardly hear her voice when she finally replied. "You—you really *are* Briac Roa, aren't you?" she asked.

"What difference does it make now, Doctor?"

"A lot of difference," she whispered. "All the difference in the world." Then abruptly she gasped, and cried, "A bird! A bird just flew past my face!"

"Tikki!" Conan burst out. "Tikki, where are you?"

The tern materialized out of the mist and alighted on his shoulder.

Tenderly Conan lifted the bird in one hand. "I'm so glad to see you again, Tikki! Are you too tired to show us the way? We're lost, Tikki. Which way is High Harbor?"

Tikki rose slowly, and almost immediately vanished in the enveloping mist.

In dismay, Conan remembered the bird's habit of rising high and circling before choosing its direction. He called it back and tried again, and then again. But it was no use. They were defeated by the mist.

It seemed to Lanna, after hearing Jimsy's latest report, that the world was again coming to an end. Not that it had ever really got started again after the Change. But there had been a chance, and if Teacher and Conan had only been here during the past few months, everything could have been so different.

Not once had she ever longed for the life that had vanished. In spite of all the hardships, this was better. Or it would be better, a thousand times better, if only greedy people would leave things alone.

Sick at heart, she paused and clutched a tree for support while Jimsy's message ate through her mind. The long-delayed meeting would be held this evening. The outcome was assured, for the trade commissioner had been passing out gifts to all the group leaders. "They're all set to kick Doc out," Jimsy had said. "Orlo's to be the boss. An' you know what Orlo an' the commissioner plan to do?"

"What, Jimsy?"

"Take over your house. Doc an' his wife, they gotta move. But Orlo says he'll

make you stay. That's how he figgers on getting even for what you done."

Had it not been for her growing anxiety over Conan and Teacher, she might have raced home in a cold fury and made plans to defend the cottage. But in her despair of the moment, she felt helpless and defeated. She almost failed to hear Mazal calling her.

Then she became aware of Mazal's voice in the distance. Some quality in it sent her homeward on the run.

Her aunt met her in front of the office. "I've just talked with Teacher," she said in a rush, her face tight with strain. "You've got to help us!"

Lanna stared at her. It was still morning. Never in her memory had Mazal been able to communicate with Teacher at this hour. "What—?"

"Something made me go up in the tower," Mazal hastened to explain. "Strangest thing—I picked up his thoughts immediately.… Tikki's with them already, but the fog's so thick they lose him every time he tries to show them.… Teacher said—" Mazal stopped for breath, then repeated, "Teacher said you'd know what to do."

Lanna could feel the blood draining from her face. "But I—I can't do anything!"

"You've *got* to!" Mazal cried, and shook her fiercely. "You *must* know how to do something—Teacher said you did. Now you do it!"

Lanna stood trembling. How did Teacher know what she'd once been able to do? She had never told anyone. Then she remembered that Teacher always seemed to know her thoughts without being told.

"I'll try," she whispered. "I'll do my best. But it's been so long…" She added, "I've just talked to Jimsy. They're going to elect Orlo this evening, and Orlo and the commissioner are going to take over the house." She repeated all that Jimsy had told her.

Mazal suddenly looked like an angry tigress. "Why, that filthy pair of toads!" she hissed. "I've never told Shann—you know how he hates weapons—but I've got a laser hidden away. Believe me, I'll use it. If they get in this place, it'll be over my dead body."

"And over mine," said Lanna, remembering the ax and making a grim decision about it. "Now I'm going to my room. Don't let anybody bother me."

In her room she lay down on the cot and closed her eyes. Tikki, she thought. Tikki, I will try and reach you. Please don't be afraid.…

But the terrible part was her own fear. For a long time she was unable even to visualize Tikki because of the dreadful expanse that lay between them. Always she saw the monstrous and forever-threatening face of her enemy, stretching through the haunted miles that she must somehow manage to cross.

She cried out once and sprang from the cot, shaking, knowing her enemy had her beaten. By will alone she forced herself back upon the cot and drove her quaking thoughts outward.

It happened so quickly, so easily, that she was not even aware of the sea. One moment she was in High Harbor, and in the next she was looking out at the shrouding mist through Tikki's eyes.

She had an awareness of many things in that instant—of Tikki's wonder at her presence, and the rapid beating of the bird heart, the wild, free feeling of riding the air on outstretched wings as she sped past the strange craft with its three dim

figures. She felt surprise at the woman, whom she had nearly forgotten, and a rush of warmth and happiness at Teacher, followed by a sudden great joy, greater than any she had ever known, as she swept close to Conan. She cried out her joy with Tikki's voice and flew around and around him, brushing his lean face and tawny hair with Tikki's wings. Then she hovered before him, a living compass pointing in the direction that the bird instinct told her was right.

She heard Conan say, "Tikki, what's happened? What's come over you?"

And Teacher answered, "It isn't Tikki you're speaking to now. It is Lanna. She has come to guide us home."

The mist began to thin the next day, and by the middle of the afternoon there were only creeping veils of it ahead. These suddenly parted, and Conan saw the harbor entrance directly in front of him. Beyond, anchored in the lee of the headland, lay the trade ship.

He saw Dr. Manski stare at the trade ship, then say to Teacher, "You warned them? You got the message through?"

"Yes," said Teacher. "I got through to Mazal again this morning, right after it happened. She said she had sent word immediately to everyone around the harbor, but she doubted that Dyce would believe it. Obviously he didn't."

"The fool!" she said harshly. "The stupid fool!"

Teacher shrugged. "I'm afraid it's too late now," he said, with a shake of his white head. "We'll be lucky to get out of the way of it ourselves. There can't be much time left."

As they swept through the entrance, Tikki left them for the first time and flew shoreward. Conan took a quick glance at the mist-shrouded sea far astern, then put the helm over and prayed the wind would hold man's wake, spreading out now to block the path, were half a dozen sailors of the New Order.

Conan paused, swaying on unsteady feet, while his eyes took in the line of youths circling swiftly on his left. Were they trying to get below him and cut off retreat? He was surprised to see another group, a compact bunch of boys and girls carrying sticks and bows, approaching warily on his right. This was an angry group, but mixed with their anger he could see much uncertainty among them, and even fright. One of the boys cried, "Watch it, Conan! That dirty bunch is out to get you! That's Orlo behind you!"

It seemed incredible that something like this could be happening in the face of what was coming. Didn't they have any idea what was in store for them?

Suddenly Conan began shouting warnings in an effort to clear the slope. He glimpsed a worried Teacher on the path below, vainly trying to do the same. But no one seemed to comprehend, and in the next instant the commissioner was upon him and had seized his arm.

"You're my prisoner!" Dyce rumbled. "Believe me, you'll pay for helping Patch escape. Take him, boys, and take Patch yonder. Out to the ship with them, and lock them up!"

Conan swept the restraining hands aside and sent Dyce tumbling backward. "Put a finger on Teacher and I'll break your head!" he shouted. "Have you all lost your minds? Don't you know you're in danger here? Get up on higher ground! All of you! *Hurry!*"

The sailors, shaken as much by his strength as by the urgency in his voice,

retreated. But Dyce scrambled up, infuriated.

"Danger from what?" he demanded. "You need a lesson—" Then his eyes widened at the sight of Dr. Manski scrambling frantically up the curving path.

"You stupid fool!" she screamed at him. "You've been told about the wave! Don't you know that everybody this close to the harbor can be killed?"

"What kind of talk is this?" the commissioner roared back. "You had no orders to come here, Doctor! Where is your vessel?"

"Sunk!" she cried harshly. "And that's where yours will be soon! I tell you, there's a tidal wave coming—a tsunami—"

Dyce slapped her angrily aside and shouted, "There's no wave coming! That tale's just a trick. You'd better be locked up with the rest of them. Boys, come here! Orlo, give me a hand!"

Conan had time for only a quick glance in Orio's direction. He recognized the rangy figure in the dirty goatskin jacket, then he began shouting again, trying to turn the crowd and drive them up to safety. But in their present mood they were totally uncomprehending. They hated Orlo, but they feared him. In a sort of horror, he realized that he had only to lead them against Orlo and the slope would be turned into a battleground.

And in minutes, seconds even, a raging wall of water could be sweeping this entire area.

Behind him he heard Orlo laugh. "All that crazy sweat about a wave. Phooey, we've had waves before! C'mon, you guys. Let's help Papa Dyce."

Conan whirled on him. "For God's sake, Orlo, you and all these people will be killed if you stay here! Get going Everybody! Get up to high ground!"

"Aw, shut up," Orlo told him lazily. "Or d'you want me to pull you apart and take you out to the ship in pieces?" Then a grin suddenly twisted his dark face as he stared at someone racing down the path. "Hold it, you guys. Here comes my little bird tamer."

Conan heard a familiar voice cry his name. For an instant out of time he forgot everything as he saw Lanna hurrying toward him, pale hair flying, dark eyes enormous in her thin face. He sprang toward her, but before he could reach her a grinning Orlo had jumped between them and grabbed her arm.

She gasped with pain, and Conan said hoarsely, "Let her go before I break your neck!"

Still grinning, Orlo flung her aside, snatched a heavy stick from one of his gang, and swung it viciously.

As he leaped in and seized the stick before it touched him, Conan wondered how quickly he could settle this insanity. He twisted the stick away, dropped it, and hit Orlo once with his fist. He caught up the sagging figure, swung it over his head, and flung it down the slope.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the trade commissioner gape at him incredulously, then tug almost frantically at the weapon hanging from his belt. Conan picked up Orlo's stick, swung it, and sent the weapon flying.

"Run, Lanna!" he yelled. "Run for the cottage!"

Swinging the stick, he charged the line of slack-jawed boys. "Move, you dumb idiots!" he roared. "Or do I have to beat you all to save your necks?"

They fled from him as they would have fled a raging madman. And it was as a madman that he turned the rest of the crowd and drove them to safety.

He was more than halfway up the slope when someone screamed, and he turned at a curious sound behind him. He saw the phenomenon of water being sucked out of the harbor by the unseen thing approaching beyond the headland. As he stared at it, he became aware of the figure in the goatskin jacket trying feebly to crawl up the path.

Conan swallowed and dropped his stick. Suddenly he raced down the slope, caught up Orlo in both arms, and began pounding his way upward again as fast as he could drive his all-but-exhausted body.

He reached the halfway mark and glimpsed the trade commissioner, who stood clinging to a tree, looking with a sort of blank disbelief down at his ship which now lay on its side in the nearly empty harbor. He shouted a warning to the man and struggled on, but he had climbed only a few more yards when the world suddenly exploded behind him.

Conan did not see the towering cliff of water that smashed entirely across the headland, instantly drowning the harbor in a raging flood. But he heard the mighty thunder of it and felt the earth shake under the blow—then the world was obliterated in flying spray, and a swirling tide raced around the slope, tearing at him and sweeping his feet from under him.

Somehow he managed to cling to his burden and hook one arm around a tree. It was over in seconds, the racing water retreating down the slope as quickly as it had come. He got to his knees and tried to lift Orlo and rise. This time his strength failed.

But from all around, hurrying, came willing hands to help.

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets*: *A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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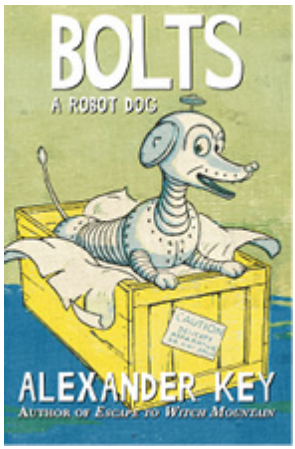

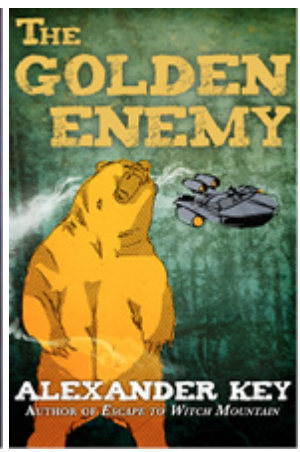

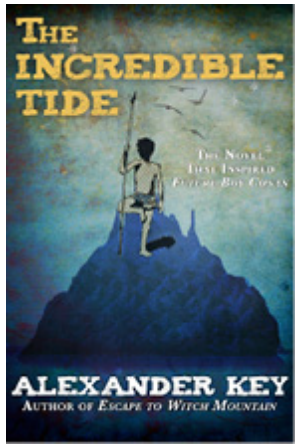
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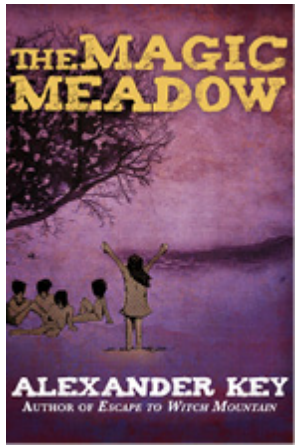
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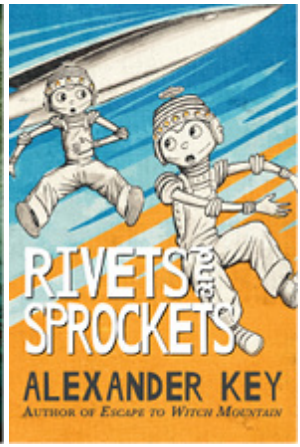

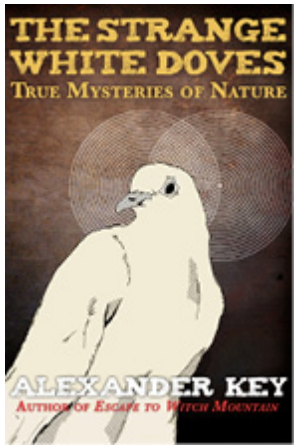

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